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THE BEAUTIFUL
STRANGERS WERE BENT
ON RESHAPING HISTORY!

SNOW WHITE AND THE GIANTS

J. T. MCINTOSH'S
TERRIFYING NOVEL OF
THE TIMELOOPERS.



The bottom half of the cover features three large, muscular, red-skinned giants standing behind a woman with long black hair, who is looking upwards. The background consists of concentric circles.

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J.T. McIntosh
(1966)

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THE TIMELOOPERS

Val's friend Jota had been killed in a "duel" with the strangers. But there he stood, as if nothing had ever happened to him. "They did it with the loops," he said. "They looped me back into exist- ence."

Why were the strangers so concerned with Jota? And why with Val? The two men were to be kept alive at all costs. They would be among the few to survive The Catastrophe, an exercise for the "giants," who were playing with history and creating havoc in the lives of the two unwitting and unwilling stars of this fiery drama.

SNOW WHITE AND THE GIANTS

J.T. McIntosh

AN AVON BOOK

This Avon edition is the first publication in volume form of "Snow White and the Giants," which was previously serialized in *Worlds of If Science Fiction*.

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**SNOW WHITE
and
THE GIANTS**

Chapter One

Lunching at the Red Lion on roast beef of Old England, I glanced out of the upstairs window and saw, across the road, a girl in a pink suit.

A moment later I choked, a morsel of meat went down the wrong way, and for a second or two, fighting for breath, eyes streaming, I couldn't see anything.

When I could see again she was just a girl in a pink suit walking along a narrow street in a quiet town, possibly the quietest country town in England. I went back to the roast beef. What I had thought I saw was a trick of the sunlight, obviously.

Many remarkable and some impossible things had been attributed to the sun in the last month or two, since a preternaturally hot summer took England by surprise. A hot summer always took England by surprise. When Byron wrote of the English winter ending in July to recommence in August, he wasn't coining an epigram. He was merely stating the obvious.

But this year . . .

In Shuteley we weren't concerned with things that happened in London, Liverpool or Leeds. In places like that anything could happen. When we heard that three Socialist M.P.s had turned up at the House of Commons dressed in sandals and shorts, we sniffed and decided to vote Tory next time (as we always did anyway).

In Shuteley, however:

The river was so low that about four miles upstream you could walk across, something which had never happened before in the history of Shuteley, which went back to the Ark.

We had the first-ever traffic jam in the center of town, and it was caused by a mini-car sticking in melted and churned-up tar.

After a school strike, all classes at the Grammar School were held outside, every day, and all regulations about the wearing of school uniform were suspended, with sometimes startling results.

A poacher claimed in court that the trout he took from a pool was not only dead, but already cooked. Although this was agreed to be the tale to beat all anglers' tales, he was discharged without a stain on his character (except those which were there already).

The hot summer was not, we were told, caused by anything of any permanent significance, and next year the temperature would probably be normal. A combination of factors, said the meteorologists (and they'd go into a wealth of detail if you gave them half a chance) was

keeping the temperature up and the rainfall down. Such conditions might not recur for two hundred years.

Every year I could remember, and I could remember about thirty, plus a few more about which I had vague childhood impressions, people had complained about the poor summer. Now they complained about the hot summer, probably more in Shuteley than in most places, because we were right in the middle of an agricultural area. This kind of weather was fine for growing grapes, but the farmers in the area weren't growing grapes.

I finished my meal unenthusiastically. In the midday heat no one was hungry. Yet habit was too strong for us to go over to the Continental routine of light lunches and heavy late dinners. So even though the Red Lion, at best, didn't claim to serve anything more ambitious than good plain meals, I still went there every day for lunch.

There were several convenient reasons for not going home for lunch -- pressure of business, the uncertainty of my lunch hour, saving Sheila the trouble of having to prepare a proper meal for me when neither she nor Dina ever ate more at midday in the summer than a few scraps of lettuce and a tomato.

But the real reason for not going home was the atmosphere there. If I didn't get French cooking at the Red Lion, at least, with my slice of history and Old English apple pie, I got some Old English peace and quiet.

The dining room at the Red Lion, directly above the bar, was the pleasantest room in Shuteley, and that was probably why I nearly always lunched there, in spite of the food. It had windows on three sides, a high roof, oak stalls which ensured quiet as well as privacy, spotless linen, and middle-aged waitresses who afforded no possible distraction. It was the kind of room you often find in a very old town, not aggressively modern, not dating back to Magna Carta -- a room which had been many things in its time, which had been modified and renovated and redecorated time and again, but never until it cried out

for it, which had been left alone apart from cleaning and painting for at least thirty years.

Also, it was never too hot. You had to say this for solid old buildings -- there wasn't much they couldn't keep out. I sighed as I finished the apple tart. And I wished . . .

I wasn't old. I was thirty-three. I was married to a pretty girl nine years younger. As manager of an important insurance office, I was probably one of the three most important men in Shuteley. I had no money worries, no health worries; no children to worry about, no relatives to worry about, except Dina and a mother in a mental home -- and by the time people are in a mental home and so far gone that the medical staff advise you not to visit them, there's certainly no point in worrying about them.

I was probably envied. I couldn't be sure, because a young boss has to be careful. He can't be too friendly, or people take advantage.

I was pretty solitary and old before my time.

And I wished something would happen.

I'd heard a story about the two-year-old son of the principal English master at the Grammar School. The infant had been at his first kids' party, and he didn't like it. He was found under the Christmas tree, crying his eyes out. Asked why, in the middle of all the fun and games, he wasn't happy like everybody else, he said: "I'm so terribly, terribly bored."

Well, a kid like that was only repeating what he'd heard at home. Poor kid, he thought it was impressively grownup to be bored.

I wasn't two. I wasn't bored, exactly. I just wanted something to happen, sure that when things settled down afterwards they couldn't be worse and might easily be better.

And something happened.

When the waitress said there was a phone call for me I was neither surprised nor interested, even when she said it was long-distance.

But when I picked up the phone in the office and found the call was from Cologne, I certainly wondered. No senior executive of FLAG was likely to call me from Cologne, in such a hurry that the call had to be put through to the Red Lion.

And when I heard Jota's voice, all sorts of feelings hit me all at once.

I hadn't seen him for two years, not since the row. I'd been quite glad not to see him, naturally enough, and yet I had missed him. He was my cousin. He had also been, perhaps still was, my best friend. I wasn't entirely sure I liked him: but you don't have to like your best friend.

"Val," he announced, "I'm Coming back." i

"Permanently?" I asked, without wild enthusiasm.

"Hell, no. But there's been trouble here."

"The usual trouble, I suppose."

"Well, apart from that, her husband's dead. No, nothing to do with me, of course. But *she* thinks . . . Anyway, I'm coming home for a while. Can I stay with you?"

"As to that, Jota," I said cautiously, stalling, "I'm not altogether . . . I mean -- "

"Oh, that business is finished," said Jota airily. "Never began, really.

Still, maybe . . . I do see your point. I could go to Gil instead. Not much risk of trouble there." And he chuckled.

Then he said: "I suppose it's hot in Shuteley too?"

"As Hades."

"Anyway, it must be cooler than it is here. I'll fly home. Expect me some time tomorrow."

And he hung up.

Jota and Gil Carswell and I had been the Terrible Three of the Third at the Grammar School. In the Fourth, Fifth and Six we remained inseparable but only one of us remained Terrible. Maturity had made Gil morose, engulfed me in respectability, and made Jota more Terrible than ever, especially after he invented sex.

Once Jota had been Clarence Mulliner, but the name was abandoned, unwept and unsung, from the day a science master dubbed him J.O.A.T.A.M.O.N., for Jack of all trades and master of none. For about a week he had been Joatamon, and then in the way of nicknames, convenience had made him Jota.

I paid my bill, crossed the road to the office, and there I found a crowd around old Tommy Hardcastle, who was trying desperately to explain something and getting nowhere.

"Break it up," I said coldly.

Nobody budged.

"But Mr. Mathers," said Wilma Shelly, "he says he saw -- "

"I did see her," Tommy said eagerly. "As clear as I'm seeing you, Mr. Mathers. She was walking along the street, right past the front door. Not six feet from me. She had a pink suit on -- "

"And she didn't have it on," said Sayell, who fancied himself as a wit and was half right. "She was walking along the street in the nude with a pink suit on,"

"That's right," said Tommy, relieved to be understood at last, and the sniggers swelled.

A tall thin youth from the accounts department, who always tried to settle everything to the last decimal part of a penny, said: "She was wearing a see-through dress, Tommy? Lace, maybe?"

"No, it was an ordinary pink suit, but sometimes it wasn't there. I mean . . . " He floundered on, and the boys and girls chuckled and giggled, and for the time being I didn't stop them.

I had seen the girl too. And I had thought, just for a moment, as she turned and glanced across the street, that she was wearing a pink skirt and giving away everything above her waistband free. The impression had been strong enough to make me choke.

Of course in such a summer there had been some startling sartorial spectacles. I wouldn't have turned a hair if the girl had been wearing a bikini, because all over, that summer, even in Shuteley, conventional ideas about when and where to wear what had been tacitly dropped. Even policemen were allowed to wear shorts, and sometimes only shorts.

But long before this remarkable summer, the world had decided it wasn't ready for the topless dress. And that wasn't all. If the girl had been casually strolling along the street in a topless dress, I'd have goggled but I wouldn't have choked. It was the abrupt change before my eyes, like a piece of montage in a movie, that hit me.

"Now you see it, now you don't," Sayell was saying, working hard for more laughs.

Although that was exactly what I was thinking myself, I came down sharply on Sayell and the rest of them, sending them all back to their desks except Tommy, who went to the door.

"I did see her, Mr. Mathers," Tommy insisted.

"Of course you did, Tommy."

I went to my private office, thought for a moment, shrugged, and started work.

The Shuteley branch of the Fire, Life and General Insurance Company -- usually known as FLAG -- was unique in its way. Shuteley, situated in the approximate middle of England, was a fair-sized old-world town, yet there was only one insurance office that counted -- ours.

This was almost entirely due to the cunning and villainy of one Amos Hardy, an old rogue who died in 1913 at the age of 108. As a young man, he set up his own insurance company in the town, with no capital and no connections, and, it was said, had not been above fire-raising in the early days when insurance was a more adventurous business than it is now. After 1909 every fire insurance company had to deposit £20,000 with the Board of Trade before it could do business -- but by that time, having made hay while the sun shone, the wily old scoundrel was making the law, and not obeying it more than he ever did.

He got such a hold on insurance in the town, did old Amos, that by the time he died nobody for miles around knew that other insurance companies existed. Of course, his business was eventually taken over by FLAG, a big national firm, but Amos had done his work so well that even in the sixties any agent of any other firm trying to drum up business in Shuteley was wasting good expense money.

That was why, in a sleepy country town that had more of Old England left in it than most -- we still had a village green with a pump, surrounded by timbered houses in which Queen Elizabeth might have slept, but had not -- there was an insurance office the size of a young factory.

One of the girls had to go to the bank, and I gave her a message for Gil Carswell, who worked in the local branch of the Midland Bank, merely telling him that Mr. Mulliner would be arriving the next day.

She had just left the room when the phone rang. My calls were vetted: this was one I had to take. I announced myself.

"Sheila here," said the phone, rather starkly.

"Yes, honey?"

"Dina has locked herself in her room."

I didn't manage to place the crisis, though clearly there was one. "What about it?" I said.

"Have you forgotten, Val? The electrician's here. Mr. Jerome. He has to get into Dina's room."

"Well, tell her to come out."

Sheila sighed in exasperation. "There is now no further competition for the silliest suggestion of the month."

"Well, I suppose you did tell her. Tell her again. Make her come out."

"Break the door down?"

I was exasperated too. "If you have to."

"A great heavy teak door? With my own fair hands? Hardly, Val. Mr.

Jerome would have to do it. And then -- "

"Yes, yes, I know." And then it would be all over town that Dina Mathers had tantrums and locked herself in and doors had to be burst open. "What did she say," I asked, "when you told her to come out?"

"She said," Sheila said evenly, "that she was scared of the fairies."

"The what?"

"You heard. Last night she saw fairies at the bottom of the garden. So she's staying in her room. They may be good fairies, but she isn't taking any chances."

I didn't prolong the discussion. "All right," I said. "I'll come over."

Sheila and I got along no worse than most imperfect marital partnerships. We might have got along a lot better -- Sheila certainly thought so -- but for Dina.

Dina was my kid sister, tiny, seventeen, as pretty as a picture and sunny-tempered with everyone but Sheila. One reason why I cracked down so hard on anyone who made fun of Tommy Hardcastle was because, although Tommy and Dina couldn't be more different in every other way, they had one thing in common . . .

I slipped out as quietly as I could, because it never does an office any good when the boss goes out and everybody knows it isn't on business. I took the car from the firm's car park and drove out past the Grammar School . . .

. . . And stopped. A hundred or so boys between thirteen and fourteen, all wearing blue shorts, filled the road.

The Grammar School was four hundred years old. The school field was a hundred yards along the road, on the other side of it, and there was no changing accommodation. So the kids changed at the school, crossed

the road to the field, and came back after sports.

The arrangement, or lack of same, was typical of Shuteley.

After all the boys had crossed, I drove past the castle across the Old Bridge and turned into the track which led to our Queen Anne house about a quarter of a mile beyond the town boundary. The track also served a few farms farther on.

Sheila, in a paint-speckled sweater and jeans powdered with plaster, had evidently been tidying up after the electrician. She was a slim twenty-four-year-old blonde, and I had not married her because she was the ugliest girl in Shuteley.

"All right," she said grimly. "You shift her."

"You didn't . . . say anything, honey, did you?" I asked tentatively.

She knew what I meant. "I told her the electrician had to work in her room, that's all. And she talked about fairies."

I sighed. Dina just couldn't see why I wanted Sheila around, and never would. What did I want with another girl when I had her? And Sheila, though she had no deficiency of understanding, was driven quietly desperate by the way Dina, the moment my back was turned, became as mulishly, deliberately obstinate as only a grown-up child could be.

I didn't see Mr. Jerome, who had found a job to do elsewhere in the house. I went up to Dina's room, Sheila at my heels, and tapped on the door.

"Dina, honey," I said.

"Val?" came Dina's voice, surprised and slightly, but only slightly, apprehensive. "What are you doing home at this time?"

"You have to come out, honey," I said patiently.

"No. I'm scared of the fairies."

"Fairies don't do you any harm."

"How do you know?"

"Dina, you didn't really see anything at all, did you?"

"I saw the fairy ring. In the wood. Didn't Sheila tell you? I'd have told you this morning, only you were gone before I got up. I thought Sheila would have told you."

No one could be as innocent as Dina when she was trying to make trouble for Sheila.

"Anyway," I said, "you've got to come out."

A brief pause, then: "I can't. I'm not dressed."

"Then get dressed."

Triumphantly: "Sheila took all my clothes away."

Sheila's eyes met mine. She didn't have to tell me that any clothes she'd taken were to be washed.

"Come out, Dina," I said more sternly.

There was silence.

Sheila held my gaze steadily. "This is what I have to put up with all day and every day," she was saying, without uttering a word. I didn't say anything either. She knew what I was thinking too. What could a man do? There wasn't anywhere else Dina could go. Our father was dead, and our mother . . . well, to give Sheila her due, even in our bitterest rows she never brought up the subject of Mary, who was in an

institution, who was the reason why Dina was the way she was, who was the reason why Sheila and I had no children and never would have.

At last the door clicked and Dina came out. Exactly five feet, dark-haired, she had the unsophisticated beauty that sometimes occurs in the feeble-minded. She also had a highly provocative body that would create a lot of problem soon, though they hadn't caused trouble yet. Not all men could be expected to keep their hands off such an attractive creature simply because there was a short-circuit in her head.

She wore a faded cotton dress far too small for her, split down the front and unfastened at the back, because there was no possibility of getting the buttons to close. Her feet were bare.

"Now listen," I said more harshly than usual, "I have to get back to work. Will you promise, Dina, word of honor, to go to the summerhouse and stay there till I get home again?"

"But the summerhouse is near the wood."

"Fairies only come out at night. You never saw fairies in the daytime, now, did you?"

She frowned. It was quite true that she had never seen fairies in the daytime,

If she gave her word she would keep it. She was trying to figure out a loophole that would enable her to do what she liked without exactly breaking a promise. If she could find one, she'd promise.

"Word of honor?" I insisted.

"Oh, all right," she said. "Now?"

"Now."

She scampered downstairs, quite content again already. She would be

able to stay in the summerhouse all afternoon, talking to herself or playing with the dolls she had there, without any feeling that she was being confined, or even that she'd done anything to be confined for.

On the point of telling Sheila that Jota was coming, I decided it would be wise to wait for a better moment. "See you, honey," I said, and leaned forward to peck her cheek.

She leaned back, avoiding me. "Honey," she said. "Everybody is 'honey.' I'm 'honey,' Dina's 'honey.' Am I like her? Do you think of me like her?""

I didn't want to get involved in anything. "Bye, Sheila," I said, and went back to the car.

I had just crossed the Old Bridge when the engine coughed and died. I cursed silently. When I had left the car in the lot I had known perfectly well I'd have to stop at the filling station on my way home, and I would have, if I hadn't been called out unexpectedly to deal with a domestic crisis.

I was about as far from a garage as I could be in Shuteley. The street I was on was so narrow that planning permission for garages had been refused, there being no room for cars to stop and fill up. I'd have to walk back to the office and phone a garage to pick the car up.

I left the key in the car and started walking. No one would touch the car, not in Shuteley. Kids might, but the car would be picked up before the Grammar School came out.

In the early afternoon, on the outskirts of town, there was very little traffic and few pedestrians, for there were no shops out here and Shuteley was not on the main route from anywhere important to anywhere else. In fact, there was nobody else in sight but one girl, and my eyes rested on her and didn't register a thing, because I was thinking about Dina and Sheila and me and wondering gloomily if there was any solution to the age-old problem of two women in one

house.

I was also envying Jota, who got his girls on a conveniently temporary basis (invariably stunning and wildly cooperative girls at that) and who got them in every country on the map, plus a few that weren't.

All in all, I was pretty sorry for myself. It wasn't my fault that my father had married a woman who was already close to insanity and went closer. It wasn't my fault he escaped the problems he had created by dying. It wasn't my fault Dina was the way she was. It wasn't my fault Sheila and I didn't dare have children.

It seemed to me that my problems, unlike those of everybody else, had been created for me and were no fault of mine.

Suddenly I blinked and looked again at the girl coming toward me.

She was not the girl in the pink suit. Although I had seen that girl only across the street and from a second-story window, one thing I was sure of was that she had blue-black hair. This was a near-blonde of about eighteen, wearing a green dress.

Or was she?

At the moment, beyond all doubt, she was. She was very tall and not particularly attractive -- just a girl who would not as a rule attract a second glance, unless on account of her height.

She came level with me, not paying the slightest attention to me -- and that must have been an act, because when a girl passes a man goggling at her with all three eyes, it just isn't possible for her not to notice.

And as she passed me, it happened again. Not the same thing -- it never

seemed to be the same thing. This time, side-on, I saw palely tanned flesh from ankles to armpit, uninterrupted.

When she had passed, I swung round, of course. However, whatever I'd seen or thought I'd seen, all there was to be seen now, though I watched her out of sight, was a very tall girl in an ordinary green dress, wearing ordinary shoes. The only thing that was slightly unusual was that I could swear she wasn't wearing nylons.

She did have, too -- and this was the first time I noticed it -- a certain baffling elegance, or smartness, or neatness. As I said, she wasn't a particularly pretty girl, and though not fat, she didn't have a sensational figure. Yet there was something about her that reminded me of the difference I had vaguely sensed when Sheila had pointed out to me a woman in a Paris creation and a woman trying hard to look as if she was in a Paris creation.

Whatever it was that women wanted to have when they dressed up, this girl had it -- even if she had very little else to contribute.

As I walked on, for a moment an old shadow darkened my mind. Mentally I was normal, indeed well above average. I'd been told after physical and psychiatric examinations that there was no trace of psychosis or anything in that terrifying area, no brain damage, no malformation. Yet no one with a background like mine could escape occasional grim doubts and fears.

I dismissed the idea for a moment, only to find it creeping back when I remembered that the only other person who had seen this kind of phenomenon was Tommy. Maybe this was something that happened only to people like Tommy and Dina and me.

Tommy had seen something -- once. I had seen something -- twice. And Dina had seen something. Fairies, she said. Or rather, a "fairy ring."

Nobody else, apparently, had seen anything.

I went back to the office, called the Central Garage and gave instructions about my car. Then I worked hard for all of an hour.

When the phone rang I answered absently, still able to concentrate fairly successfully on insurance -- for the last time in weeks.

"Val," said Sheila, "now the electrician has to get into the summerhouse."

"Oh, hell," I groaned.

I should have known. The wiring in our house dated back with the rest of the house, I strongly suspected, to the time of Queen Anne. I'd probably have let it be as long as it worked, but a FLAG executive from London, paying a semi-social call, happened to notice the wiring in the house and hinted strongly that it was hardly the thing for the total insurance manager to have an electrical system in his own house that constituted a greater fire risk than a moat filled with crude oil. So we had called in Mr. Jerome.

The cable out to the summerhouse was probably more dangerous even than anything in the house itself.

Obviously Sheila had already asked Dina to let the electrician in. In childish triumph, Dina saw how to score over Sheila after all. Dina had promised to stay in the summerhouse till I got back. So she'd keep her promise. Come hell or high water, she'd barricade herself in and stay where she'd promised to stay.

"I can't come again," I said. "Can't he come back tomorrow?"

"He says if he doesn't finish today he won't get back for a week."

"Well, get her out," I said in sudden irritation. "Don't keep calling me."

"She's your sister."

"Sure, but you're there and I'm here. Surely you can outsmart someone like Dina?"

"Get her out, you said?" Sheila retorted in a hard voice. "Okay. I'll get her out. I'm bigger than she is, and older, and much tougher. I'll get her out. And I'm going to enjoy it. I'm going to have the time of my life."

There was something unusually vicious about the click as she hung up.

I didn't care. I was fed up with Sheila and Dina. Why couldn't either of them, just once, in their different ways, leave me alone? Sheila was always with me, Dina was always with me. I couldn't settle down to my work any morning or any afternoon with the slightest confidence that I wouldn't suddenly be called upon to deal with a Sheila problem or a Dina problem.

Rather wildly, I thought: why couldn't Sheila and Dina fight to the death so that there would be only one of them left? I could render unto Sheila the things that were Sheila's only if Dina didn't interfere -- and vice versa.

But could I put Dina in an institution? No. Apart from anything else, she was too innocently reasonable. Even if I wanted to do it, I doubted if Dina could be certified. She wasn't even feeble-minded in the usual sense. In many ways she was quick and shrewd. In no way was she slow. She was quite a bright eight-year-old -- only she happened to have a body nine years older.

Grimly I forced myself to work. But my heart wasn't in it.

Chapter Two

Business with an agent kept me at the office until about seven, and when we were through I took him for a drink. Since he didn't like noisy pubs we went to the new cocktail lounge, The Copper Beech.

The place was empty when we entered. People going for a drink on their way home went to the pubs. The Copper Beech, all glass and chromium end plastic and inflated prices, catered mostly for couples and parties having a night out, from eight o'clock onwards.

The agent gulped his beer and departed, and I finished my pint of bitter in more leisurely fashion. I was downing the last drop when a party of kids in their late teens came in, quietly for kids, looked around and marched to the far end of the lounge.

They were all in shorts and blouses, end for a moment I thought they were Grammar School seniors. Then I saw that they were all about eighteen or over, too old and far too tall to be school kids. All the men were over six feet, and the girls not much less.

With merely a glance at them I was rising to go. In Shuteley in summer we saw hundreds of campers, hikers end cyclists.

Then I saw that one of the girls was the girl in the green dress, and another, the only one who was not tall, had blue-black hair.

I ordered another pint end sat down again. The bartender rapped on a partition behind him and a waitress in a black frock came to attend to the new customers.

There were eight boys end eight girls. They weren't noisy and they evidently intended to keep strictly to themselves, for they sat together in a corner round one table and only one of them spoke to the waitress, giving the order. The others didn't even talk among themselves until

she left them. Then they started talking and laughing like any other kids, only more quietly, as if afraid they'd be overheard.

The girl I had seen wearing the extraordinary green dress was now clad like the others. She had not looked at me and perhaps wouldn't have known me if she did, because earlier, in the afternoon, she had gone to a lot of trouble not to look at me at all.

Now I saw that they weren't exactly like any other group of young campers after all.

I wouldn't have noticed anything out of the ordinary if I hadn't had a spur to my curiosity. Nobody else did. As it was, I saw for the second time a curious immaculacy which seemed to be common to them all. Every one of these kids was a glossy, spotless, highly-polished model of a teenage camper.

I thought about that and remembered where I'd seen the same kind of glossy unreality before.

A pretty girl *really* on a jungle safari might conceivably spend most of her time in a leopard-skin swimsuit or a white suntop and shorts, though it's unlikely. But unlike actresses in safari movies, she simply could not go on day after day looking as if she'd just stepped from her dressing-room.

That was it. That was exactly it. The boys in this group had every hair slick in place. Their shirts were dazzling. There wasn't a spot even on their shoes. The girls weren't in the usual motley collection of loose sweaters, tight sweaters and rumpled shorts. Everything anyone wore had been made to measure, and there wasn't a crease to be seen among the lot of them.

A small thing? Certainly -- a small impossible thing. Did these kids have dressing-rooms right outside The Copper Beech?

Two or three of the girls were pretty, and one had a one-in-a-million

face. Out of any large group of girls you could pick a dozen of more or less uniform prettiness, attractive through the possession of firm young bodies and regular features, well-shaped eyebrows, small noses, soft mouths. But it would be a matter of chance if, even in a hundred thousand girls, you'd find one with both the individuality to make her unmistakable and unforgettable and the beauty to go with it.

One girl had the kind of face that could launch a thousand nuclear submarines.

She had blue-black hair, very white skin, and was probably the girl who for me had started it all, the girl in the pink suit. But I couldn't be sure. Apart from her beauty, other things set her slightly apart from the rest. She was only about five feet four, easily the smallest in the group. She was pale and all the others were tanned. She might have been a little older than the others. She was treated with a certain slight deference. And despite what I've been saying about them, she made the others look untidy.

I sipped my beer, not inviting conversation with the bartender, who was busy anyway. As it happened I'd been sitting facing the far corner when the kids entered, and could therefore go on looking in their direction without showing undue curiosity.

I managed to pick up a few words. They were talking about a "duel." A duel, they thought, would be fun. Some argued, said it was a crazy idea.

Evidently they'd seen the plaque on one of the old houses round the green. One of the last duels in England had been fought on the village green, between the squire and a wealthy traveller who both fancied the same serving wench. Neither of them got her. They were both fatally wounded, and for thirty years or so (until the incident became romantic, quaint, something to be proud of), the affair was hushed up.

There was some reference to "Greg," who was not present. (So there were more of them.) And glances were cast at Snow White when he was mentioned, puzzling glances which I couldn't fathom.

Snow White and the giants, I thought. 'Snow White is the fairest in the land.' She had blue-black hair, too. Snow White, dwarf among giants.

Watching as casually as I could, I noticed something else.

Nobody smoked. And nobody drank beer.

It makes sense not to start smoking now that we know what we know. But could you get sixteen sensible kids all in one group?

As for the beer question . . . Quite a few of the youngsters had soft drinks. Others had what looked like cocktails, sherry, port, whisky, rum. Obviously they were not teetotallers.

Out of sixteen campers, surely at least three or four would drink beer on a hot summer evening?

I had finished my beer again. It was a small moment of crisis. Was I to walk boldly up to Snow White and the giants and say: "All is discovered. You are not what you seem," or buy another beer and stay quietly watching them?

I did neither. I stood up to go.

And as I stood up, Snow White glanced at me and recognized me. I saw it in her face, although the moment after recognition she looked casually around as if she'd merely been giving the place the once-over.

But I knew I wasn't mistaken.

One thing was certain -- that expression, half startled, half interested, had not come over her face simply because she had seen me in the upstairs window of the Red Lion. For one thing, I hadn't seen her look up. For another, it wasn't just an I've-seen-you-before-somewhere expression.

She *knew* me. She hadn't expected to see me, but the moment she did, she thought at once: 'That's Val Mathers . . . ' and a lot more,

I wished I knew what the lot more was.

I'd certainly have gone over and spoken to her, but for the fifteen giants. You don't use the "Haven't we met before?" routine when the girl has fifteen friends with her.

Instead, I went home.

As I closed the garage door after driving home, Dina rushed up to me. She was still in her Cinderella dress, but her arms and legs were swathed in bandages which she had obviously put on herself.

"She hit me," Dina panted. "She hit me and scratched me and threw me out."

"Now, Dina -- " I began.

"She got in through a window and pushed me and hit me and scratched me, pulled my hair and I couldn't stay in the summerhouse."

"Forget it, Dina," I said wearily.

"It was her fault I couldn't keep my promise. She -- "

"Dina, I'm not interested," I said firmly. "You knew there was a man working in the house. You knew he had to get into your room and the summerhouse later. There was no need for any trouble if you'd done as you were told."

"I do what you tell me, don't I? You told me to stay in the

summerhouse, only she wouldn't let me."

At that moment Sheila came round the front of the house. She looked at me uncertainly, ready to explain, or fight, or refuse to say anything, depending on my attitude.

"Dina," I said, "go and get dressed."

"Aren't you going to -- "

"I'm not going to do anything. Go and get dressed. Now. And no argument."

Hurt, Dina not only went but stayed in her room the rest of the evening, sulking.

Sheila and I had an unusually pleasant evening on our own for once. I opened a bottle of Rüdesheimer and then a bottle of Niersteiner, and we got pleasantly merry.

At last I thought the circumstances were right, and told Sheila that Jota was coming back to Shuteley.

They weren't right enough. Sheila's face set hard and she said: "For how long?"

"He didn't say."

"He's not staying here."

"No. He's going to ask Gil -- "

"If he visits this house, I'll stay in my room till he's gone."

"Sheila, he promised -- "

" He promised," she said fiercely. She stood up and began to prowl

about, clenching and unclenching her hands. Sheila didn't often hit the roof, but when she did she was inclined to go right through it. "I never told you why I was so wild that time, Val. Not because Jota made a pass at me. If a man like him never made a pass at me, I'd know I'd better take up tatting. Not even because he used your trust to get me in a situation where those horrible things could happen . . . But because when you came back, when you walked in on that . . . "

She had worked herself up to such a pitch that for the moment she couldn't go on. Her color was high, her chest was heaving, and I thought it was a long time since I had seen her look so marvellous.

Of course I'd never forget that time when I found Jota quite crudely trying to rape my wife. It had been horrible and it had been incredible. I'd always thought, not so much that Jota would never touch Sheila because she was my wife as that if he did feel it coming on, he'd tell me. "Val, I want Sheila. I'm going to have her." That was Jota's way. I'd been afraid of that.

I'd never thought for a moment it would happen the way it did -- Jota, having got me out of the way by a brazen lie, which I discovered only because the person I was going to see happened to meet me in the street, fighting coarsely with his best friend's wife, his cousin's wife, like a sex criminal.

Sheila, under control again, broke into my thoughts. "You were surprised, weren't you?" she said.

That was an understatement. "I couldn't believe it," I said. "But when I did, I -- "

"Yes, we're not talking about that. That was all right. You threw him about so effiently I was quite cheered up. Never thought you could do that son of thing, Val. I was proud of you then. And I didn't mind seeing Jota hurt, not in the slightest. That bit of it was fine . . . Let's go back a bit. You were surprised."

I waited uneasily, vaguely sensing what she was getting at.

"You were surprised because I was fighting," Sheila said. "You were astonished because I was being half killed and still went on resisting. You were certain that Jota merely had to cast a lustful eye on any girl, and she'd immediately surrender with a sense of profound gratitude."

It was true, but I couldn't admit it. "I never said -- "

"Val, I know perfectly well what you never said. I also know what you did say. Afterwards, when we had to talk, when we had to pretend to be civilized again and work out whether Jota was to be charged with assault, or what -- that's when you gave yourself away: All you were concerned with was Jota. *He* had to promise. *He* had to go away. *He* was the one to be convinced beyond a shadow of doubt that nothing remotely like that must ever happen again. And when *he* accepted all that, you were satisfied."

I just looked back at her.

"Nothing about me," she said bleakly. "You couldn't trust me. If Jota tried again, next time I'd obviously leap into his arms -- "

"I never said -- "

"Oh, Val, who cares what you never said? Your whole attitude made it a hundred per cent clear. Jota was the one to handle somehow. I didn't matter at all. Whatever Jota decided was as good as done. You had to work on Jota. I was merely a pawn in the game, if that."

I couldn't argue convincingly, because she was working a vein of truth. No girl ever said no to Jota. No girl ever could, whoever she was, whatever the circumstances. And it was entirely correct that my surprise on that horrible night had been due largely to Sheila's desperate resistance. I frankly couldn't understand that. It wasn't as if Sheila and I were all that close, even then. Why had a girl who had never resisted me resist Jota?

A diversion was available. "Why did you wait two years to tell me this?" I asked.

She sighed and sat down, crossing her legs. All the fire had gone out of her. She wasn't going through the roof this time. "Some things you can't take back, not ever, even if you want to. Two years ago, we might have been on the threshold of a great new understanding . . . Now we know we weren't. You won't have children, though I ache for them. And Dina's getting worse every day."

I was grateful to her for phrasing the problem of Dina like that. "Dina's getting worse every day." If she'd wanted to be venomous, there were a thousand other things she could have said about Dina, seven hundred of them not unjust.

"Sheila," I said, "I like you."

She smiled faintly. "I know. You couldn't quite say 'love,' because you're being sincere tonight. And then, I put you off your stroke earlier when I stopped you saying 'honey.' You'll never call me 'honey' again. You'll be careful, cautious, like a good insurance manager, and from now on you'll call Dina Dina and me Sheila."

There wasn't much to say to that, so I went for a brief stroll round the house.

Remembering Dina's story about fairies in the wood, I walked down the garden, not expecting to see anything at all.

The river Shute, meandering tortuously across flat country and

through woods, half enclosed our house in the inner walls of a W bend. As far as I knew the house had never been flooded, though the river had been known to reach the garden.

Behind our garden, in the apex of the W, was a small patch of trees and scrub which would have been very popular with courting couples but for the fact that they couldn't get into it. The river curved round it, and on the land side the only entry was through our garden. And we had high, thick hedges.

It was a piece of wasteland which was of no use to anybody. The local landowner had tried to sell it to us, but we didn't want it. Anyway, as Dina had said with childish shrewdness: "Why buy it when it's ours anyway?"

At the fence at the bottom of the garden I stopped.

Was it imagination, or was there a faint glow in the copse?

It wasn't a fire, there was no moon, and it could hardly be fairies -- though I now understood Dina's story. To her, what else could a glow in the copse at night mean but fairies?

I climbed the fence and advanced slowly.

The glow was very faint and would never have been noticed on a night which was not completely dark. The odd thing about it was, it didn't seem to have a source. There was nothing but the glow. I walked through it, stood in the middle of it, looked in all directions, and there was nothing but a faint blue radiance.

I ran back to the fence, climbed it and hurried back to the house.

Sheila was in the bedroom, in a shortie nightdress (in this extraordinary summer, most people wore less than that at night), about

to go to bed. We had left a very important discussion hanging in the air. But this was something I had to share with somebody, and Sheila was my wife.

"Sheila," I said breathlessly, "I want you to come and look at something outside."

"Where? Not in the garden, for heaven's sake?"

"In the copse."

She laughed in protest. "Like this?"

"It'll cool you down. And no one can see."

On the point of protesting further, she saw I was deadly serious and realized it would probably be quicker in the end to humor me than to argue with me. She put on shoes and we went down the garden.

I was afraid it was going to be like those frustrating incidents in detective stories where the hero takes the cops to the murder apartment, only to find the body's gone, the signs of a struggle have been removed, and even the bloodstains have vanished.

However, as I helped Sheila over the fence she saw the glow and suddenly became reluctant to go further because she thought there was something instead of because she thought there wasn't.

"What is it?" she whispered, making no move forward.

"I don't know. YoU do see it?"

"Of course I see it. But what is it?"

After a moment or two she came further into the copse with me, and together we tried all the things I had already tried alone -- looking among the branches for the source of the light, at the sky through the

leaves, at the still river beyond, under the bushes.

Sheila's reaction was exactly the opposite of mine. The less I understood the glow, the more I wanted to find out about it. More practically, perhaps, Sheila satisfied herself that it was a mystery and was then quite prepared to give up.

"Well, we've looked," she said reasonably. "There's nothing else to see. Whatever it is, it's staying put. Let's go to bed and look in the morning."

And that's what we did. I wasn't sorry, though, that I'd made Sheila come and look. I wasn't imagining things. There was a radiance in the wood with no source.

Later, Sheila wanted to talk about something, but it wasn't the radiance.

"I did hurt her, Val," she said, watching me. "I'm bigger than she is and a lot stronger. I thought, well, after all, she's a naughty kid and she needs a lesson. I meant to beat her up and I thought it was going to be fun, like that time when . . . "

She stopped, and although I had followed her thought I said nothing. She was thinking of that other time when I had thrown Jota all over the place, fighting mad, hardly knowing what I was doing, and Sheila had watched and been quite happy about it, because it was me who was doing the throwing and Jota who was being thrown, and because of what had happened before that.

But Dina wasn't quite the same.

"It didn't work?" I said.

"No."

"I didn't think it would."

"Well . . . don't you mind? Was I terribly wrong to . . . to do what I did?"

"I don't know. I don't suppose so. When any kid's on the wrong track you talk to him, try to persuade him; and I guess if you don't try giving him a good hiding you're missing a bet . . . But you can't beat sense into Dina."

"But you don't mind?" Sheita insisted.

"I don't see that it's anything to do with me," I said.

When we got to bed, more friendly toward each other than for a long time, I thought it would be a good idea to do something about it. But nothing happened, and Sheila made no move, merely saying "Good night" in a tone which seemed to contain finality. So a chance was lost, like a thousand others.

Chapter Three

Before breakfast next morning I was back in the wood. Sheila didn't come with me. She said that if I found anything I could tell her and she'd take my word for it.

I found absolutely nothing. The copse was exactly as it had always been, and in daylight no radiance could be detected. By the time it

occurred to me to look for footprints or other signs that people might have been there recently, I'd done so much stamping around that the search was futile. Besides, hardly anything grew under the trees, and the thick, springy leaf-mold did not retain tracks well.

When I got back, Sheila merely said: "It must have been some kind of natural phosphorescence. One egg or two?"

"Phosphorescence has a source, like any other light," I insisted.

"Well, look again tonight. I wonder if Dina will be down in the next ten minutes? It's no use calling her, of course."

Nobody at the office mentioned any unusual incidents the day before. Being the boss, I didn't hear the gossip. If Sally Henrey, my secretary, hadn't been on holiday I could have asked her about the morning's topics. Wilma Shelly, who was standing in for her, was too junior for me to confide in her.

I wasn't a confident boss. I was efficient, of course, or I'd never have reached my present position. But I didn't possess the sheer self-assurance that every good boss has to have, the feeling that he's a boss by right, the unquestioning, unquestioned conviction that things will always be done his way, the right way, the only way.

After an hour's correspondence there was a lull, and I considered phoning Gil Carswell. But Gil, far less self-confident than me, had not become the boss, and I didn't like to call him at the bank unless the matter was really urgent. That was why I'd sent the message the day before by a girl who had to go to the bank anyway. Gil was terrified of the bank manager, who had always seemed singularly inoffensive. But then, Gil was terrified of everybody and everything.

While I was still thinking about Gil, the phone rang. Aloud I muttered: "Oh, God, not Dina again."

It was Jota. "I'm at London Airport," he said. "Be with you this afternoon sometime. Have you seen Gil since I phoned yesterday?"

"No, but I sent him a message."

Jota chuckled. "Of course. Mustn't disturb him at the bank. The manager would chew his ears off . . . at any rate, such desperate liberties must never be taken. By the way, is anything happening in Shuteley?"

"What would happen in Shuteley?" I said cautiously, wondering if by any chance he'd heard anything.

He hadn't. "As you say. Silly question."

"As a matter of fact," I said, "there is something going on. Maybe just a small thing, but something . . . No, don't ask questions. Wait till you get here."

"You intrigue me . . . Something happening in Shuteley seems like a contradiction in terms. But I can wait. Oh . . . how did Sheila take the great news that I was coming back?"

"Unenthusiastically," I said.

He chuckled again. "Don't worry. I promised. If you remember, I never promised before."

He rang off.

That was technically true, that he had never promised not to make a pass at Sheila. I wondered, however, if anyone but Jota would have considered such a thing worth saying. You weren't morally entitled to stab a man in the back because you'd never promised not to.

As I hung up, Wilma came in. She was breathless and rather indignant.

"Mr. Mathers, there's a young man insisting on seeing you, and nobody but you. He looks like a camper, and he's . . . well, the things he's been saying to the girls -- "

"Send him in," I said. "Right away."

She looked surprised; but said nothing and went out.

The door opened again and a young Goliath entered. He wore a white T-shirt and shorts and was obviously one of the giants, probably the biggest of them all. I judged him to be six feet seven.

He had not been one of the giants with Snow White at The Copper Beech.

"Val Mathers?" he said, advancing with outstretched hand. "I'm John Smith."

"Really?" I said politely.

"No, not really, if you insist, but it's as fair a name as any, isn't it?"

"You wouldn't by any chance be Greg, would you?"

He dropped his hand. He was not pleased.

"How in fisk do you know that?" he snarled.

Not pressing my luck, I said: "Where's your camp, Greg?"

For a moment he simmered, and then decided to be friends again.

"In a bend on the river about a mile upstream."

I knew the place. It was three-quarters of a mile beyond my house, on the other side of the river, the north side.

He sat down without invitation, looked at me expectantly and said nothing.

He was blond, very goodlooking, perhaps nineteen or twenty. His accent puzzled me a little. It was not foreign, his speech was very clear, and yet I had never heard anyone speak quite like him. I had not missed those two words "fair" and "fisk." The natural thing to say would have been "as good a name as any," and "fisk" seemed to be a cuss word.

There was nothing strange about his shirt and shorts and shoes except that they fitted better than clothes generally do and looked as if they had just that moment been put on, brand new. But for the giants that was nothing strange.

He was completely at ease, and I was therefore puzzled by his easy manner and sudden silence -- as if he expected me to tell him why he'd come.

"Well, Mr. Smith?" I prompted. "Or Greg, as you like?"

"I want to insure against catastrophe in Shuteley during the next twenty-four hours," he said coolly.

"Catastrophe?" I said.

"Catastrophe."

"In the next ~twenty-four hours?"

"In the next twenty-four hours. You're remarkably up on the quicktake, Val."

There were lots of openings. I chose one. "You can't do business under a false or incomplete name. John Smith won't do. Greg won't do."

For a moment, for the second time, his eyes gleamed with a feral light,

and I knew that this man was dangerous. He didn't like to be balked. Despite his easy manner, he was liable at any moment to become an animal. A huge, dangerous animal.

I tried another opening. "We can always supply better rates for particular contingencies. If you wanted to insure against flood, say -- "

He grinned, all easiness and friendliness again. "Flood's unlikely, isn't it? They tell me the river's never been lower."

"Catastrophe in twenty-four hours in Shuteley," I said, "is unlikely. Another thing, Greg -- you're over twenty-one?"

"What about it?"

"If you're not, there are difficulties."

"Do you sell insurance or not?"

"I don't sell insurance, Greg. I arrange it, if it seems to be to the mutual advantage of both parties. Now, let's see -- *you* want to insure, Greg? But you don't live in Shuteley."

"No."

"And -- in the next twenty-four hours?"

"We're only going to be here twenty-four hours," he said simply, "give or take an hour or two."

"What sort of sum have you in mind?"

"Nothing most. A million pounds, maybe. Perhaps two million."

It was time, I thought, to restore sanity to the conversation. "I'm afraid such a transaction would hardly be practicable," I said. "Although in theory insurance against any contingency is possible, such as rain on a

certain day, failure of a crop, or delay in a certain delivery, there are always difficulties in definition, and it takes time to work out policy conditions. It would be quite impossible to draw up a policy within the time specified, to operate . . . "

Greg was laughing, a great roaring bellow of amusement that rattled the windows. "Val, you sound like an old man," he said.

"You're not really serious about this at all, are you?" I said thoughtfully.

He stopped laughing at once. "No. It was just an idea. Quite a most idea, really . . . but as you say, hardly practicable. I just wondered what you'd say."

"Who is the girl," I said abruptly, "whose dress disappears?"

Unsurprised, he answered: "All of them, when they wear Luxon."

"Luxon?"

"Well, you see, the idea is . . . it's one of those feminine paradoxes, arising out of the curious way women think . . . If you're wearing a dress, a perfectly decent dress, and bits of it disappear at times, that's all right. Nothing indecent about it, because it only seems to disappear. It's really there all the time."

"Why does nobody drink beer?"

"We don't like the taste. And it's grossing." ' ú

"Grossing?"

"Fattening."

"Greg, where do you come from?"

"Here."

"Here? Maybe. But here isn't Shuteley."

"Here," he repeated blandly.

"What's this about a duel?"

Again I had disconcerted and angered him. The red animal light flashed in his eyes.

"Nothing about a duel," he said shortly. "And what do you know about it, anyway? No, never mind."

He stood up and moved to the door. "Sorry you won't do a deal, Val," he said over his shoulder, his composure restored. "But as you guessed, I didn't really think you would. By the way, you know Gil Carswell, don't you?"

"Yes, but how -- "

"And Clarence Mulliner?"

"Yes. In fact -- "

"In fact, he'll arrive here at 3:10."

He closed the door quietly behind him.

Gil called me from the bank, for the first time ever, and said: "Val, I want to see you fight away. Come out for a drink."

"All right," I said. "See you in The Copper Beech."

"That chrome-plated morgue?"

"There won't be anybody there."

"I see. Right. In five minutes."

I left the office at once to walk to The Copper Beech.

At the door Tommy grabbed my lapels in his eagerness to tell me something. "She just passed again, Mr. Mathers. If you hurry you'll catch up with her."

"Thanks, Tommy," I said, released myself and went out into the mid-morning sun.

Fifty yards ahead was the girl in the pink suit. Although I could see only her back, there was no doubt whatever that she was Snow White. Her slim, smoothly rolling hips were only one of the assets of a one-in-a-million shape to go with her one-in-a-million face; it would have been a crime to cover legs like hers with the sheerest nylons.

One small surprise: I wouldn't have expected such a girl to wear the same outfit two days running.

Since she was alone this time, I'd have hurried after her and stopped her. But it wasn't necessary. Glancing over her shoulder she saw me, and making no pretense that she didn't know me from Adam, stopped and leaned against a lamp standard to wait for me.

As I approached, her shoulders were suddenly bare. This time I saw more clearly what happened, when it happened. Out of the corner of my eye I still saw the lower part of her jacket and her skirt. It was as if my gaze had burned a hole in her clothes.

There were a few people in the street, and some of them were staring. For the most part, however, they seemed to be pretending that they

hadn't noticed anything. (This was Shuteley.)

When I was ten feet away Snow White's jacket was complete again, but her skirt was abbreviated to playsuit length. Then she wore the whole suit again except for a large circular cut-out round her navel.

Cut-out wasn't quite the right word. Material and flesh merged into each other like candlelight and shadows.

More than her blue-black hair had made me think of her as Snow White. Her flesh all over -- and by this time I'd seen quite a lot of it, in aggregate -- was pale and creamy, and in this summer that was a rare achievement. None of the giants was pale. Every one of them was tanned, some lightly, some quite heavily.

She was with the giants but not of them.

I stopped. "Hello," I said.

She smiled.

"I'm Val Mathers," I said, "as I suspect you know very well."

I scored a point with this. Her eyes widened, and she asked: "What makes you say that?"

"You recognized me in the bar last night."

She nodded, admitting it. But she added nothing, admitting no more.

"Who are you?" I asked.

"Miranda."

"Just Miranda?"

Her suit, oddly enough, was not changing any more. Perhaps what one

saw depended on the angle of vision. Moved by a spirit of experiment, I stretched out my hand to touch her waist . . .

. . . She struck my hand hard, though without malice. "Wait for an invitation," she said coolly, and turned and walked away, to my disappointment. I had expected more from the encounter.

From the back, like the other girl, she wore perfectly normal clothes.

I found Gil in The Copper Beech. Although the lounge was not as empty as it had been the previous evening, only half a dozen people were there.

We sat in the corner where the campers had sat the evening before, and we had it to ourselves.

Gil and I were the same height and weight, and at one time had resembled one another. Now he had thick glasses and a permanent leave-me-alone frown, and I hoped I didn't look remotely like him.

Gil could have done anything. That is, he had the theoretical ability to do almost anything. In practice he had achieved nothing and never would.

Being sensitive myself, I understood him better than anyone else except possibly Barbara. But nobody could do anything for him. He couldn't do anything for himself.

The slightest criticism, the merest breath of condemnation, even meant as a jest, deeply wounded him. He was a bleeder. Scratch him, and he bled for days. If he made a genuine mistake, it took him a month to recover from it. But it didn't even have to be genuine. Someone merely had to hint that something, anything he'd done was a stupid thing to do, and he'd start to bleed slowly, silently.

Of course he defended himself. He spent his life and all his vast potential defending himself against attack, when he wasn't being

attacked.

I was nearly as sorry for him as for myself. What was the use of being a near-genius when a casual remark by an office-boy could mean a month of misery for you?

Gil had married Barbara, another moody genius, who sketched and sculpted and wrote poetry and flatly refused ever to go further than five miles from the village green. She had roots, apparently.

"What do you know, Val?" Gil asked abruptly, when the waitress had brought our beers. "What do you think is going on?"

I took out a penny. "Let's toss for first innings," I said. Gil lost, and I put him in first.

"A gang of kids have been hanging round the house," he said. "They seem very interested in Garry."

Garry was Gil's two-year-old son. He was an only child and was going to remain so for two excellent reasons. Barbara couldn't have any more children, and neither -- as he had told me one moresely drunken night when we were both feeling sorry for ourselves -- could Gil.

"Can I have Dina?" he asked. "She'd be company for Barbara."

So that was it. "Jota's coming," I reminded him. "And he wants to stay with you."

"With us?" Gil was astonished. "You've got a great big house. We only have . . ."

He stopped.

They had an outside lavatory. The wooden stairs up to their flat were so worn that they looked as if they'd been carved curved. The floors creaked and were uneven . . . when houses had been revalued a year or

two back, nearly everybody's valuation, including ours, was doubled, at least. Gil's had been halved -- human beings weren't supposed to live in such conditions any more.

Although as a bank clerk Gil didn't make a great deal of money, others in his position, married with one child, managed to live far, more comfortably. But neither Gil nor Barbara was remotely practical. They bought things they thought they needed, but didn't. They didn't buy things they did need.

"We can manage, I suppose," he said stiffly.

"You still want Dina?"

"Yes. I have to go to work, and Barbara's nervous."

"Dina won't be much help."

Gil shrugged impatiently. He was always impatient when anyone didn't instantly understand him, even though he had not supplied all the essential information.

"I don't think they mean any harm, the kids. Maybe they won't even come back. It's just that Barbara's alone in the house all day . . . I thought of Dina because she doesn't go out much. And if Jota's there . . ."

He let that hang, and I didn't take it off the hook. As far as we knew Jota had only once broken trust with either of us in that particular way. Gil knew what had happened -- Sheila had said something to Barbara. The idea of Jota making a pass at Barbara seemed fantastic to me, but it probably didn't seem so fantastic to Gil.

"All right," I said. "I'll ask her."

Rather surprisingly, Dina got on quite well with both Gil and Barbara. Moody geniuses don't like competition or criticism, and Dina never

gave them any.

We said no more about Jota. Barbara would cling to Dina, and away from me, away from Sheila (whom she really trusted in a peculiar way) Dina would stick to the one person she knew.

"There's something else about those kids," Gil said. "They came into the bank and changed some money. Silver into notes. I was the only one to notice a certain very strange thing, and for some reason I didn't point it out to anyone else."

Gil felt in his pocket and produced two half-crowns, two florins, two shillings. He made no comment, so I examined them.

It wasn't hard to get the point. The half-crowns were both fairly shiny, dated 1961. The florins were old and worn, dated 1935. The shillings were dated 1952.

"I see what you mean," I said.

"Do you?" He sounded skeptical. Gil, with his inflated IQ, could never believe that anyone else had more capacity for putting two and two together than . . . well, Dina.

I looked more closely, One half-crown had an infinitesimal scratch across the Queen's hair. So had the other. The milling on the florins was identical, particularly worn just below the date.

"There were a lot more of these?"

"Yes."

"Any notes?" I asked.

"No. Well?"

He was challenging me to reach his own conclusion.

I said: "I know why you didn't point this out."

"Do you?"

"They must be forgeries, of course. Forgeries so good they'd be hard to detect, and won't ever be detected now that they're mixed with other coins and the duplication isn't significant. Notes weren't forged, or duplicated, because the numbers would eventually give them away."

Gil nodded with reluctant respect. "And why didn't I point it out?"

"Because you're responsible. This might mean trouble. If you let it go, it can't possibly mean trouble."

"Clever," he sneered. "Now tell me why it was done."

"They needed money, so they made it," I said.

He sniffed, but didn't pursue the topic. Instead, he said: "Tell me what you know."

I told him. I came last to the brief encounter with Miranda.

His eyes gleamed.

"The ultimate in provocation," he said.

"What do you mean?"

"Could it be simpler? The impact of any outfit any girl wears lasts about five minutes. After she's taken off her jacket and you see the lowest low-cut neckline you ever saw, after you've had a good look, she might as well put the jacket on."

I must have looked unimpressed for he went on in a torrent of words to develop the theme.

"Does anybody stare at the Grammar School senior girls in their little white pants, except wistful old men? But let them put on skirts and ride bicycles in a breeze . . . A pretty girl peels to a bikini, and every man on the beach stares. For a while. Then she puts on a beach wrap, leaves it unfastened, and they stare again every time it falls open."

"I never thought of that," I said.

He gaped at me. "You never thought of it? Ten minutes after viewing the delectable Miranda you've just been describing?"

"I was too busy doubting my own sanity. But I see what you mean now."

And I did. Successful strippers don't just take their clothes off. They tantalize, And what could be more tantalizing than a luxon dress? What greater inducement to look could there be than not knowing what you're liable to see?

Gil had hit on a good phrase -- 'the ultimate in provocation.'

Current fashion wasn't anywhere near the ultimate in provocation. Indeed, with untidy, too-long hair, tight jeans and loose sweaters, long pointed flat shoes, unnatural makeup and too-short skirts on the wrong girls, teenage glamour had never hit a lower low.

This kind of thing was nothing remotely like current fashion.

"Where are they from?" I murmured. "Outer space?"

The complete absence of reaction showed that I was not expressing any idea completely new to Gil. And he was the most confirmed skeptic in Shuteley . . .

I had meant to go home for lunch and ask Dina if she'd like to go and stay with the Carswells for a while, but I hadn't phoned Sheila to warn her, and it was just as well.

As I left the office, Miranda fell into step with me and asked: "Care to buy me lunch?"

It was a question that needed no answer.

I took her to the Red Lion, partly through lack of choice and partly because the idea of sitting opposite her in a stall all to ourselves was anything but unattractive.

She was not wearing the pink suit. She wore a silvery gray dress that didn't disappear, and she was still sensational.

She must, if the camp was the giants only base, have gone straight there and come straight back.

As we sat down, I said: "I waited."

"For what?"

"An invitation."

She smiled a faint smile and said: "This is a different kind of invitation."

"What are you going to tell me, Miranda?" I asked.

"Why are you so sure I'm going to tell you anything?"

"Because the only reasons you could have for being here with me now are to tell me something or ask me something -- and I have a feeling that I couldn't tell you much you don't know."

"There could be another."

"Such as?"

"Interest in you. I might be curious what you're like. Anyway -- what would you like to know?"

"Where do you and your friends come from?"

"Here," she said, as Greg had done.

The waitress interrupted us then, and when she left with our order Miranda moved back a square.

"I'll tell you one reason why I wanted to lunch with you, if you like."

"Why?"

"I want you to introduce me to Jota."

I might have guessed. In this crazy business, one thing could be expected to be unchanged -- that Snow White would instantly be drawn to the prince.

"What do you know about Jota?" I said.

She merely smiled and shrugged.

"Greg called him Clarence Mulliner," I observed.

She sat up quickly. "Greg? When were you talking to Greg?"

"This morning. He came to see me."

She was angry, I saw, and perhaps afraid. It was an excellent chance, and I hoped I'd be able to take it. The possibility that I might be able to

play Snow White against Giant No. 1 had not until that moment occurred to me.

The less I said, and the more Miranda said, the better.

"What did he want?" she asked sharply.

"Amusement, I suppose. He wanted to insure against catastrophe here in Shuteley in the next twenty-four hours."

"The vandal," she breathed.

"Vandal?" That was interesting. It hadn't occurred to me that Greg might be trying to insure against disaster and then cause it.

"You wouldn't understand."

"Of course not. I understand very little."

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to be rude."

And then, with a baffling switch that took the wind out of my sails, she smiled and said: "It doesn't matter anyway. Greg's a fool, a dangerous, megalomaniac, irresponsible fool . . . but it doesn't matter."

Rallying, I said: "Why not? Because we don't matter? Because we don't live in the same country as you? The same world? The same dimension? The same time?"

Most inopportunistly, the waitress brought our soup (brown Windsor, of course).

When she had gone, I asked: "How old are you, Miranda?"

I got the smile again, and nothing else.

Possibly, I thought, she was many, many years older than she looked.

This close, I had an opportunity to see that the flawlessness common to all the young strangers was absolute. I don't mean that they were all handsome or beautiful. But like Miranda, they had no hair out of place, no scars, no scratches, perfect teeth, perfectly manicured hands. In the heat of a summer day, she didn't sweat. She appeared to have no makeup on, yet I was sure she had. Right through history, women had gilded the lily. Even in a different history, I was sure they would do the same.

I asked her: "Are you wearing makeup?"

"Yes."

Her gray dress was at the same time unremarkable and scarcely possible. No creases or marks. Its fit was several degrees beyond currently known perfection.

Ordinary dresses worn by ordinary girls weren't like Miranda's. Either the machinery showed, or the absence of machinery.

"You can't," I said thoughtfully, "be wearing a bra."

"No."

"Then how . . . ?" Well, romantic myth aside, women needed something to provide the shape they wanted.

"Selective tension," she said easily. "Different degrees of elasticity in different places."

And at sight of my expression, she laughed for the first time.

She stopped when I said: "You do come from the future."

"Listen;" she said. "I'll tell you one thing, and it's the truth. Then we'll talk about something else. We come from the *present* , and we come from *here* ."

"Yet you say 'come,'" I answered quickly.

A flicker in her eyes registered appreciation of the point. Since she didn't reply, I pursued: "Another dimension, then?"

"Dimension?" she said. "What's that?"

I tried to convey my own rather fuzzy idea of the theory of co-existent worlds. She seemed interested.

"This is only a theory?" she asked. "There's no proof?"

"None. But you might know whether it's more than a theory, I think."

The faint smile again. "Now," she said firmly, "we'll talk about you." After a pause she added: "And Jota."

"No," I said. Although I'd had my chance, and lost it, I might get it back. "We'll talk about Greg. And you."

I *had* lost it. She had regained her control. She wasn't going to ask what had happened between Greg and me. She wouldn't discuss it.

So I told her about Jota and Gil and me. Every time I tried to turn the conversation back to her and the giants, she promptly turned it back. I told her briefly about Sheila, but not about Dina or Mary.

Only three times, briefly, did the talk swerve from the path along which Miranda was casually driving it.

The first time, after telling her about the days when Jota, Gil and I were the Terrible Three, I asked what she and her friends called themselves. She thought for a minute and then said: "Well, what would you call us? Any ideas?"

"Snow White and the giants."

She stared and laughed rather uncertainly. She thought she ought to know what I was talking about, but didn't. She was off balance, so I said:

"Greg said 'as fair as any,' instead of 'as good as any.' He said 'how in fisk' . . . ?"

Miranda iumped, nearly spilling gravy over herself.

"I presumed," I said casually, "that meant something like 'how in hell.'"

"It means rather more than that," said Miranda. "There are sexual connotations."

"I'm not surprised. He said 'up on the quicktake.'"

Miranda was silent.

"A simple mistake," I went on, "if you read a phrase in a book. Quick on the uptake. Up on the quicktake. Unimportant . . . except that nobody born between 1860 and 1960 could say such a thing . . . Then there was 'most,' apparently a term of general approbation. 'Grossing,' meaning fattening. I may have missed a few."

"Greg is careless," said Miranda. "Very careless."

"And you're not, I noticed. Except in wearing a luxon suit."

"I won't do it again."

"Pity."

The second time was when the sweet came up. I asked about the food, and she said, in slight surprise: "It's only food," and though she instantly turned the conversation again, I was left with another strange

impression: Miranda and the giants ate and drank as we stoked a fire or filled an oil heater. It had to be done, but the quality of the fuel, so long as it came up to certain minimum standards, was immaterial.

The last time was when we left. As she stood up I noticed something I'd have seen before if I'd been reasonably observant. She carried no handbag, and she had no pockets.

"Where do you carry things?" I asked.

"What things?"

"Money, cosmetics, a handkerchief, keys -- that sort of thing."

"Why would I need them?" she asked mildly.

We had emerged into bright sunlight. It was as hot as usual.

"Thanks for the lunch, Val," Miranda said. "I'll see you later."

And she strode off so abruptly that even to attempt to detain her I'd have had to shout or run after her.

From the way she walked, I knew she could run faster than I could.

Looking after her, I decided that Miranda, in her way, was as careless as she thought Greg was. True, it was a different way.

We had lunched together, man and girl. And we might have been robots.

Certainly some apparently personal things had been said. I'd said a lot. I had acted more or less like a human being.

But Miranda . . .

Everything she had said and done she might have said and done from

ten thousand miles and ten thousand years away.

"You don't really believe it, do you?" Gil sneered. A sneer was the only way to describe it. Where anyone else would have expressed polite surprise, Gil's reaction was incredulity that anyone could be so stupid, even you.

"I do," I said.

"You mean one of these -- giants tells you Jota will arrive at 3:10, and you expect him on the dot?"

I looked at my watch. It was eight after three.

"You can believe what you like, Gil," I said. "But these giants are no ordinary kids. I've been trying to figure out how Miranda was able to make me talk like that an hour or so ago, without ever letting the conversation get more than two or three degrees above absolute zero, and now I see it. She knew the questions to ask."

Gil started to say something, but I hadn't finished. "Maybe Greg meant Jota would arrive in Shuteley at 3:10 exactly, he didn't say. But I think he meant here. I think he meant that wherever I was, whether I went home or stayed in the Red Lion or came back here, Jota would walk in at 3:10."

"Of all the fatuous, ridiculous, superstitious . . . " Gil began.

He'd probably have found quite a few more adjectives before he had to cap them with a noun. But just then the door opened.

I'd given instructions for anyone who called on me after three to be sent straight in. That was why Miranda found it so easy.

"Why look surprised?" she said. "I told you I wanted you to introduce me to Jota."

"I'm surprised," I observed, "that you should consider an introduction necessary. You didn't with me."

She smiled and turned to Gil. "Hello, Gil," she said. "Has Garry's flush gone yet?"

Although Gil didn't answer, I could see he was startled. Garry evidently had had a flush, and it wouldn't have surprised me to learn that there was no apparent way for the giants to know about it.

Miranda sat down, primly arranging her skirt the way girls do (though I suspected she had had to practice). And the very instant that she turned and looked at the door, Jota came in.

He had never been handsome. I never knew any lady-killer who was really goodlooking. Women seem to go for men of the oddest shapes and sizes. Jota had a long nose, very deep-set eyes, hollow cheeks and black hair nearly, but not quite, as dark as Miranda's. He was tall and very thin. He looked like a fanatic or visionary, and this impression wasn't wrong, though fanaticism was only part of his complex makeup.

He didn't look at Gil or me. He went straight to Miranda, took her hand gently and pulled her to her feet and said, from his nine-inch advantage in height: "You're exquisite."

"I know," said Mirand~ coolly. "But thanks for noticing."

"Your name must be Venus."

"If you say so," said Miranda.

There was a lot more of this, and I realized as I watched that Jota, for only the second time, was annoying me far more than Gil ever could.

It's strange about old friends, people you know from way back -- you've forgotten long ago whether you like them or not. The question has ceased to be relevant.

Gil, now . . . He had not made a friend in the last fifteen years. He would die without making another friend. He had become an amalgam of armor and anger and acid and antagonism, a fortress on an island that no army would ever want to storm. On the mainland, they'd march past the defenses against nothing with scarcely a derisive smile.

Only Jota and I (and Barbara, in a different but not warmer way) would ever put up with Gil.

Jota . . . I had admired and envied him. He had done and was still doing many things I wished I could do, and his amatory success was the least of these. He was, after all, a Jack of all trades (even if master of none). There was nothing he couldn't turn his hand to. He had the courage or selfishness or brute insensitiveness to do what he liked and invariably get away with it. Most people treat you as your own attitude and expectation invites them to treat you. And Jota got what he wanted -- whatever it was. Always. Everywhere.

I had had every right to object when Jota's roving eye lighted on Sheila. I had no right to object when Miranda caught his eye, but I did.

Surprisingly, the meeting was brought to order by Miranda. She suddenly said: "I must be going," and walked out as abruptly as she had left me outside the Red Lion.

"That girl," said Jota, "fills me with a quite irresistible desire to see that dark head on a white pillow. It will not be resisted. Now -- what's going on?"

He hadn't changed. He had never, I suspected, been in love; he had a completely mistaken idea of what love was. Stumbling and imperfect as our connubial relations were, I believed that both Gil and I knew far

more about love than Jota would have learned by the time he died.

Although a great deal of his time and too much of his energy were expended on women, he was always able to dismiss them completely as he did now. Once or twice, long ago, I had heard him make passionate word-love to a girl whom he knew, in the Biblical sense, make another date with her, and then say cheerfully, the moment she was gone: "Thank God that's the last I'll see of that cow."

He heard our side of the story first. He wanted it that way, and things were generally done Jota's way.

Gil had nothing fresh to say. The giants had not been near his house again. I glossed over the fact that I had not yet asked Dina to go and stay with the Carswells.

In my turn I told them all the facts but not all my guesses.

Then Jota said: "All right, let's call on the giants. We'll go to the camp."

It was only to be expected that Jota would propose direct action.

Gil was reluctant. He didn't say he was afraid to go. He argued against the idea in general. But when Jota and I decided to go without him, Gil stopped arguing and seemed to think it might be a good idea.

So Jota and I went to look at the giants' base.

Chapter Four

I drove home first, taking Jota with me, for he insisted we should change into dark clothes.

We knew the place where the camp must be: "In a bend on the river about a mile upstream." It was a piece of wasteland which campers had used before, but not often, because modern campers had cars or caravans or bicycles or trucks, and if they hadn't they wanted to be near a road where they could catch buses. This spot was near no road, and anybody camping there who wanted to come into Shuteley had to walk all the way.

It was a good place, perhaps the best place in the vicinity, for campers who wanted privacy. Yet it was also a place where anyone who wanted to spy on them could do so very easily.

And yet, as I said to Jota just before turning into our drive: "We may be making fools of ourselves. If they knew the precise second when you'd walk into my office, don't they know already that we're on our way to spy on them?"

Such considerations didn't bother Jota. "Then something may develop. And that's what we want."

I left the car outside the house, and Jota took his one trunk inside with him.

Sheila met us in the hall, and at sight of Jota she started and shot a quick glance at me which could only be described as unfriendly. "I thought I told you . . ." she said.

"Sorry," I said rather awkwardly. "I knew you were going shopping. I thought you'd have left."

I had to put it that way, because when we came in I knew she hadn't left. Her Austin mini was still in the drive.

"Hello, Sheila," said Jota easily. "You look more wonderful than ever."

Sheila said nothing. She picked up her shopping bag and went out, slamming the front door.

"You should have phoned, you know," Jota told me. "Don't you know anything about women? It's nothing to do with whether she loves me or hates my guts. Maybe she wouldn't have prettied herself up anyway. You should have given her the choice, to be here or not, to be dressed up or just -- "

"Let's change," I said irritably. I didn't want a lecture from Jota, of all people, on Sheila, of all people.

Jota was staring past me at the stairs. I turned. Dina was descending slowly, dressed in an old pink evening dress of Sheila's.

"She saw an old Goldwyn picture on television the other day," I murmured. "Beautiful girls coming down wide staircases." Raising my voice, I called: "Dina -- would you like to go and stay with the Carswells?"

She stopped playacting at once, lifted her long skirt and ran down the rest of the way. "Now?" she said eagerly.

"If you like."

She turned. "I'll go and pack."

"Wait, Dina. Aren't you going to say hello to Jota?"

"Hello," she said, and started for the stairs.

"She's lovely," Jota 'said. "No change? I mean -- "

"I know what you mean," I said shortly. "No change."

"That," he said, "is a great pity."

"That," I replied, "is an understatement."

"What I mean is -- "

"I know what you mean."

He seemed to feel I should be more forthcoming. "Naturally I'm interested," he said. "Dina's my cousin."

I added nothing, however, and the subject was dropped.

The probable camp site being on the other side of the river, we rowed across the placid Shute in a rubber dinghy. Seldom used, the boat was invaluable at times, the nearest bridge being at Shuteley.

We made a considerable detour in order to be able to approach the place wherd we expected the camp to be from the far side, and we stopped talking as we neared the spot. Sound can carry unexpectedly in the open, especially near water.

Of course Jota, Gil and I had played as kids all around Shuteley, and the countryside had changed less than the town, which hadn't changed much. There were some places where we knew every bush, every tree and every stone, and this was one of them.

Along the riverside east of the probable camp site there was a jungle of undergrowth, and it was through this that we approached. A slight breeze rustled the leaves and cloaked any noise we might have made.

The camp was exactly where we expected and the giants didn't know we were there. At least, if they did they were pretending they didn't, and that seemed out of character.

At first sight their camp was like any other. There were two large tents and five small ones. Most of the boys and girls I had already seen were there, and there were some I was sure I hadn't seen. The sixteen who had been in The Copper Beech the evening before, plus Greg, were not, therefore, the whole company.

In the shade of a canopy two girls were reading magazines. Four of the men lay on the grass sunbathing, and on the other side of the big tents, three girls lay drowsily in the afternoon heat. Two or three more sat on the river bank, not bathing, merely dangling their toes in the water.

Two who were missing were Miranda and Greg. The chance link produced a sudden stab of jealousy in me. Was Miranda Greg's girl?

Such things happened. They kept happening. A girl talked as if a certain man was as far as she was concerned the person least likely to succeed. And then you found out . . .

On the face of it, Miranda didn't like Jota much and liked Greg less. But I knew that any vague ideas I might have about Miranda and me -- adolescent fantasies, anyway, fatuous even if I weren't married to Sheila -- were going to be overturned by Greg or Jota, if not both. I knew this because such things always happened. It was in the nature of things.

Anyway, the camp presented a very normal scene. I didn't know what Jota had expected, but I hadn't expected this. Not when the giants didn't know we were watching them.

We could see very well, we were unlikely to be detected, but unfortunately we were too far away to pick up any of the lazy, murmured conversation of either group of sunbathers.

And after five minutes I was more than ready to leave. I was rather afraid that Jota was going to force the issue by striding into the camp and making something happen. Uncertain why I didn't want that, I was

nevertheless certain that it would be a mistake.

Every single person in the camp was dressed exactly as might be expected. Nothing sensational like the luxon dresses was visible, and that was puzzling. If the giants didn't mind creating a sensation in Shuteley, why were they so conventional in their own camp?

Did they know we were watching them, after all?

The tents, too, were straightforward . . . Primus stoves, plastic containers, buckets, basins -- every item of camping equipment I could see looked standard.

That crystallized one of the things that puzzled me about the giants. If their origin was as strange as I suspected, one of two things could have been expected.

Either they'd make quite certain their clothes, money, appearance, speech, camping equipment, and everything else they had with them were authentic. Or, careless of what Shuteley thought of them, they'd appear in their true colors, which were, I was quite certain, vastly different from anything we had ever seen.

But they steered a baffling middle course.

At last what I had feared came about. "Come on," said Jota in a normal tone, and moved forward.

"No," I whispered urgently, trying to hold him back.

"They're ordinary kids or they're not," he said. "Let's talk to them and find out."

Reluctantly I followed him, and we strode into the camp.

No, they hadn't been expecting us. The sunbathers sat up, startled, one of the girls who had unfastened the strap of her bra holding a towel in front of her.

"Greg!" somebody shouted, and Greg emerged from one of the tents. I wondered: was Miranda in there?

"Hi," said Greg casually, coming to meet us.

All the giants gathered together -- and they *were* giants, seen in this setting. Nobody was fat, but the vital statistics of both boys and girls were unusual . . . Average figures among the girls, I calculated, would be 41-27-40. Scaled down, very satisfactory. But they had to stand back for the full effect to be made.

There was no pretense that we were anything but unwelcome visitors. Someone whispered to Greg, and then he faced us.

"So you came to spy on us, Val," Greg said. "Jota's idea, I guess. He said Jota this time, not Clarence Mulliner.

"We simply came to -- "

"Fft," said Greg derisively, pointing. I followed his glance. His meaning, and his conclusion, were unmistakable. We had come from dense undergrowth. Nobody openly approaching the camp would ever have come that way.

While my head was turned he must have made a gesture. Before we could move we were each in the grasp of two of the most gigantic of the giants.

From that moment I ceased thinking of the giants as kids. When two of them could hold Jota and I as those four held us, they were men.

"A duel," said Greg. "No, two duels. That's it."

There was an excited hum among the giants.

Jota's silence surprised me. He was seldom at a loss for words.

"Knives or guns," said Greg. "I'll take Jota. Obviously, Wesley, you can have Val."

They began to form a ring. One of the girls ran into Greg's tent, and emerged almost at once with a pair of wicked-looking knives and two old-fashioned dueling pistols in a case.

"This has gone far enough," I said. "Where's Miranda?"

"She isn't here," Greg said. And the way he said it made me certain that her absence completely let him off the leash, that he felt free to do things he might not otherwise have dared do.

In a daze I saw Jota calmly elect to fight with the pistols. His idea was to play along with the giants, see how far they would go. Perhaps he was right, I thought. On his own, without any conventional reaction, he'd possibly have been able to get himself accepted on his own terms as usual.

The giants played out the farce gravely, though with suppressed excitement. One of them offered himself as Jota's second.

Then Greg said, not to us but to the rest of them: "This really is a test. This really is worth while. I'm taking Jota." He stopped, the pause heavy with significance, although what the significance might be was a complete mystery to us. He went on: "So after this we'll all know, won't we?"

A wave of uneasiness ran through them. All the girls stood well back. Then we got on with it. The pistols were inspected, the meeting-ground paced out. Then Greg and Jota stood back to back, and at a signal began to stride slowly and steadily apart.

They had not let me be Jota's second. I had therefore had no chance to examine the pistols. They would, of course, be loaded with blanks. Perhaps they were not really pistols at all, but cigarette lighters or elaborate toys.

I couldn't take the affair seriously, and I was sure Jota wasn't doing so either, because it was obvious that the giants were simply playing at duels. There had been a chill for a moment as Greg made his little speech, but already those not directly involved were smiling and laughing, as if this was all a big ioke.

Jota and Greg took their last pace and turned. The two shots were so close that it was impossible to tell which was first. Jota's, I thought, but of course he had deloped -- fired in the air. Crazy though he might be at times, he wasn't taking the chance of really shooting Greg.

But Greg had not deloped. And incredulously I watched Jota sink to his knees, blood at his mouth.

When we reached him he was dead.

I don't know what I said and did. The rest was nightmare.

Fragments of thought flashed through my mind. One was that if our world really was nothing to the giants, murder in it didn't count to them. If to them we were unreal, they could kill us as we'd shoot clay pipes. Was that the explanation?

I also thought of the incredible manner of Jota's death. He had always seemed larger than life. Yet at the end, he died grotesquely -- firing in the air, quite certain the duel was a piece of juvenile playacting, letting Greg pick him off.

I wondered if Miranda's presence would have made any difference. Would she have stood back with the rest of the girls? Or would she,

having spoken to me three times and lunched with me, have felt what none of the others seemed to feel -- that we were human beings? I had to admit she had never shown any sign of it.

I noticed then, though I was unable to analyze it until later, that Greg had proved a point. The giants were looking at him with new respect -- no, not respect, rather caution and apprehension. Why this should be I didn't know. The reason had to be something more than that he had proved he could shoot straight. Perhaps it was because he had proved he could kill.

Incredibly, in the middle of this, they were making me choose weapons. Greg was telling me -- the sense registered, though the words did not -- that if I won, I was free to go.

"Killer," I whispered.

"We're all killers," he said indifferently. "You're a meat eater."

"Are you going to eat Jota?" I demanded.

"That's a point," he admitted, and groped mentally. "A hit -- a palpable hit," he added.

Realizing that this much was real, that I had to fight Wesley and he would kill me if he could, I chose the knives. Pistols were no use. Greg had shown he could shoot, and no doubt Wesley could too. I didn't know I couldn't, but I was fairly sure, never having tried.

Wesley was taller than me but not much heavier. Although some of the protocol of duello had been observed, no one had said anything about dress. I still wore dark pants and a dark sweater, and Wesley, in swimming briefs, evidently intended to stay that way.

We started fighting. In the first two seconds Wesley slashed my left wrist deeply and painfully, and nothing could have brought home to me more clearly that I was fighting for my life.

I knew this was a nightmare, I knew it wasn't real to the giants, and yet it had been real to Jota and it was real to me.

So I fainted, I slid under that terrifying blade, and before I got clear again I slashed Wesley's leg. It was a fearsome cut, and it nearly made me sick. The giants shouted and screamed with excitement.

I had tried to tell Greg that we couldn't kill them, that the death of Jota had been murder because Jota couldn't possibly try to kill him. And if I killed one of the giants, the police would see it only as murder.

But if I didn't kill Wesley, he would kill me. This I now fully accepted.

The slashed leg hampered him considerably. Faster than me until then, he had shown no particular skill with a knife. But then, I had none either.

He attacked twice and I dodged him, making him waste energy and lose blood. And now he knew that he could lose this fight -- I saw it in his eyes. With every moment he was slower and weaker.

I got him again. Although the slash across his chest did no serious damage, it made him a gory object, with rich blood welling from his leg on the grass and long streaks running down his torso.

It was his blood that nearly finished me. I slipped on it and he was on me, the knife high.

Too high. Never having fought with a knife, any more than I had, he paid for the dramatic gesture, knife raised at arm's length for the death stroke.

I cut his legs from under him, and as he fell pressed the knife into his heart. It was torn from my fingers.

Unfortunately for all of us, he didn't die quite as quickly as Jota had

done . . .

"All right, Val," Greg said soberly, "you can go."

They were all sober now, the excitement fading from, their faces. Some of the girls looked rather sick.

I turned and walked out of the camp. What I was going to do now, I had no idea. The giants had killed Jota and I'd killed one of them.

Of one thing, somehow, I was certain. The giants would cover up. If I went to the police and took them back to the camp, there would be no sign of Jota or of Wesley. The blood would be gone . . .

Jota and I were striding into the camp. For a moment we faltered and stared at each other. Then Greg, enjoying himself, was saying: "No argument, please. Just get out."

Grinning at me in a not unfriendly way was Wesley. And I knew from his expression that the duels were something more than a figment of imagination. He looked exactly as if I had beaten him, fair and square, in any contest, and he was ready to admit it.

But there was no blood. He was unscratched, as I was.

It wasn't quite the same as the last time we had entered the camp. This time they were expecting us, lined up. The sunbathers were there too, on their feet. The shy girl had fastened her bra.

In a second sense, Jota came to life.

"No," he said. "I'd like to stay here with you. In fact, I will."

Greg frowned. "That was meant as a warning. If you -- "

"I'm warned," said Jota easily. "Now I'd like to stay with you for a while. I'll be no bother -- I've camped out often."

All the giants seemed taken aback.

"I'll even promise not to ask questions," Jota said. "Gosh, it's hot." He started taking off his jacket.

"We'll throw you out," said Greg.

"And I'll come back," Jota said. "I came back from the dead, didn't I?"

"We arranged that," said Greg ominously. "Next time we won't loop you back."

Jota had his jacket off and was unbuttoning his shirt. "Can someone lend me a pair of shorts?" he asked.

Greg suddenly laughed -- the bellow that had rattled the windows of my office. "I like you," he said.

"Most people do," said Jota.

"You're a bit like me," said Greg.

"In more ways than one," said Jota softly. And now he was speaking with significance.

There was a sudden silence. Jota knew something he wasn't supposed to know.

I was out of this, yet not entirely out of it, not without some clue. I had known Jota a long time . . .

"Remember," Greg said, "I killed you."

"Remember," Jota said, "I let you."

They suddenly all decided by common consent that if Jota was halfway one of them, I certainly wasn't. " He can't stay," Greg told Jota.

"That's all right," said Jota calmly. "I don't need anyone to hold my hand."

They were going to let him stay. He was going to have his way, as usual. And I knew he'd had this idea in his head all along.

Jota, despite a wide variety of personal contacts that were fleeting or lasting, was a lone wolf. He didn't want me with him. He wanted to do this his way.

"What's your name?" he asked one of the girls, the prettiest next to Miranda.

"Irwina," she said.

"Let's go and dangle our toes in the water -- after somebody lends me a pair of shorts."

Greg looked at me. "Get out," he said briefly.

I didn't argue. Jota, living in the camp, was bound to learn a lot -- perhaps everything there was to learn.

I walked away and left them.

It was quicker to walk back along the river bank than it would have been to cut across country to the road into town.

There was no point in going back to the office. I knew I couldn't do anything useful that afternoon. Fighting for your life, even if you win,

doesn't leave you cool, calm and collected.

To say I was shaken was an understatement. Unharmed, unscratched though I was, I had lived the nightmare. Jota had died, and yet he had experienced less than I had. I could still feel the pain in my wrist, the warm dripping of blood. I would never forget what it was like to fight for my life, knowing the only choice was to kill or be killed. Nor would I forget what it was like to be a killer.

If I ever killed again, there would have to be a reason, a stronger reason even than self-defense. Until then I had not realized there could be a stronger reason. Yet if you kill merely to avoid being killed, you don't want to kill. If you kill in anger or hate, you mean it . . .

I was going home to have a stiff whisky, or two, or three. Sheila was out. And Dina would have gone to the Carswells.

I was glad Sheila wouldn't be at home. If a man and woman are close, married or not, everything that happens has to be shared, and as soon as possible. Once I'd have been running home to tell Sheila what had happened, to talk it out with her. As it was I was impatient to get into a cool, darkened room, out of the sun, with a glass and a bottle of Glen Grant.

I meant to get drunk. Yet I don't drink a lot, and seldom alone.

Ahead of me, I saw a swimmer in the river. And what a swimmer! She was moving away, gaining on me. She must therefore have slipped into the water, unnoticed, just in front of me.

Although I could see only her dark head, she must be Miranda. Nobody in Shuteley could swim like that.

I guessed at once where she was going.

When three or six or a dozen out of the ordinary things happen at more or less the same time, the chances of a connection between them are

overwhelming. Miranda was swimming downriver. She wasn't swimming lazily, as anyone might on a hot day. She was swimming with a purpose, to get somewhere.

About half a mile downriver, on the south side, was the copse where I had seen the unexplained, inexplicable radiance. And short of going all the way to Shuteley, crossing there, coming back on the other side and then walking up our drive, past the house and through the garden, the only way to reach it from the giants' camp was to swim or use a boat.

I started to run. I wanted to be in the copse before Miranda, to hide and see what happened. Unless I ran I had no chance of beating her there, because I had to run past the copse to where Jota and I had left the dinghy, row myself over and get myself established in the copse before Miranda arrived.

I made it. I was across the river and well hidden at the bottom of the garden just before Miranda swam up the first inside leg of the W bend.

I saw her climb onto the bank, shaking the water from her hair . . . then she said, not loudly: "Come out, Val."

There was no point in going on pretending. I stood up, pushed my way through the bushes, and joined her on the small strip of grass at the edge of the river.

"You saw me?" I said.

"I saw your boat."

At the point where I crossed, only a tiny stretch of river past the bends was visible. By a piece of bad luck, Miranda must have been exactly at that point when I was rowing myself across.

She sat down on the grass. Her swimsuit was a brief white two-piece, and I had never seen anything so lovely as her in it. Not sexy -- that, too, of course, but she was genuinely beautiful rather than provocative.

"Where were you?" she asked.

I sat down too. "At the camp. With Jota."

"What happened?"

I told her.

For a moment she was furiously angry, though silent -- the first time I had seen her really alive. But all she said was: "That Greg . . . Of course he'll ruin everything. We knew that. Everybody knew that."

"Ruin what?" I asked.

She ignored that. "And in this crazy duel, Jota just died?"

"He fired his gun in the air."

She nodded. "That figures."

"He said -- and everybody seemed to make sense of it but me -- he *let* Greg kill him."

She nodded.

"But . . . that's ridiculous. I mean, Jota didn't know the clock was going to be put back. He didn't, I'm certain. So why would he . . . ?"

"That's not what he meant."

"Greg used the word 'loop' . . . 'Next time we won't loop you back.' "

She sighed.

"Ifs some kind of time warp, obviously," I said. "The same thing that enables you to be here, when anyone can see you were born in some

other century."

Miranda said: "Val, please give up. I've told you a few unimportant things. There aren't many unimportant things left that I can tell you. But if you promise to stop fishing, we can talk if you like."

An idea stirred in my mind as I noticed that even in a bikini she managed to be more elegant than a Paris model.

I had, of course, no intention of stopping fishing. What I wanted to do was pull this beautiful fish so far out of water that, gasping for breath, she'd tell me what I wanted to know before I let her off the hook. It might not be possible, but I meant to try.

Her white two-piece was already quite dry. Her pale, creamy skin had already stopped steaming and only her damp hair showed that she had been in the water a few minutes ago.

Until that moment I had thought a bikini was just a bikini, and a girl wearing one was not so much dressed as censored. But Miranda's two-piece was subtle . . . the bra, with shaped straps, not too small, concealed and revealed her thoughtfully and tastefully, as if a talented artist had painstakingly drawn and re-drawn the lines until his critical eye was satisfied. The briefs, not too tiny either, harmonized with and complemented muscles and curves. Superficially similar, the white two-piece was actually in a completely different class from the brutally utilitarian kind of bikini which is merely insurance against arrest.

"Well?" she said. "Shall I turn round so that you can inspect the other side too?"

"I'm thinking," I said. "Suppose a girl from the seventeenth century were here now. Just an ordinary pretty girl, not the daughter of a duke. She probably wouldn't be very clean. She would have bad teeth. Her face would be marked with smallpox and maybe worse things. Makeup, if any, would be crude. Scars, not properly treated, would mar her skin."

Miranda was listening so intently that I was encouraged.

"Her clothes would be old, imperfectly washed with poor soap, or no soap at all. They'd fit only approximately. If there was a bit of cleavage, it would be unsubtle, almost as if she'd forgotten to put something on. Am I making sense?"

"I'm listening," said Miranda.

"A girl of today," I said, "can make far more of herself without really trying. There's plenty of clean water and good soap, and in this part of the world we've beaten the insect problem. She wears new or nearly new clothes, and they fit. Underneath she can wear lightweight machinery that does a marvelous job on what Nature forgot to do. All kinds of makeup are available, if she happens to know how to use it, and she doesn't have to have bad teeth. However . . . "

I paused. But Miranda Said nothing.

"After another century or two," I said, "purely technical things like better materials and seamless joins will be taken for granted. As well as that, though, experience in design should count for something. Oh, I know none of you would wear the clothes you've been wearing here back where you came from, any more than a girl from my office would go around in 1666 dressed as she is now. But if she went back -- "

"Don't labor it," said Miranda. "You've made your point."

"What puzzles me," I said, "is your curious compromise. I mean, everything I saw in the camp looked right. You've all got your hair cut the right way. Yet just this morning, when you wore a pink suit that would otherwise have been perfectly all right for Shuteley High Street, it was made of luxon."

"Well . . . that was a mistake."

"I thought only Greg made mistakes."

Rather sharply she said: "It's not mistakes Greg makes. Some of the things he does he means. Others he just doesn't care about. A mistake is something you'd take back if you had the chance. Greg wouldn't take anything back."

"But he just did. He looped Jota back."

She decided to surrender on that, yielding on one more thing that didn't matter too much.

"Loop equipment is small and light and the effect is purely local," she said. "There isn't supposed to be a set at the camp, but apparently someone's got one. I'll have to do something about that . . . "

"Just minor gadgetry," I said. "Like luxon. Nothing most."

She looked at me sharply, wondering, as she seemed to have done once or twice, if I was possibly not as primitively moronic as I was supposed to be.

She told me a little more about the loop technique, and I realized that I'd been pretty near the mark. To her, it was minor, unremarkable, which was why she told me about it. In much the same way I might have tried to explain a zip-fastener to a girl of the seventeenth century.

When small, local disaster occurred, you snuffed it out of existence. If an axe slipped and slashed your leg, you snapped back a few seconds and avoided the accident. If a car, carelessly reversed at a harbor, plunged into the dock, you took the careless moments back and braked before the car went over the edge. If you dropped a precious vase and it shattered in a thousand fragments, you turned the second hand back and didn't drop the vase.

It was a useful but very ordinary technique, possibly more significant than paper-clips, zip-fasteners, safety-pins and cigarette lighters, but

not to be classed with things like the transistor radio, television or atomic energy . . . she thought.

And it occurred to me for the first time that Miranda was no genius, merely an ordinary girl of her time, fairly intelligent but no deep thinker.

"Another thing," I said. "Food is just food. The quality doesn't matter. Now that's a real surprise. All the indications are that people will become more choosy, not less. But the expected doesn't always come about. I could make a guess . . . Expanding world population makes food supply more and more difficult. And maybe synthetic food isn't practical, at any rate not in your time. So people are conditioned, treated, drugged, trained to regard food as merely fuel. To eat enough but not too much. To be healthy, to avoid anything grossing, never to get fat and never to regard food as an end in itself."

Miranda refused to react, so I prodded her again. "So you do come from the future. Despite all protestations."

She lay right back on the grass. "We're from the present," she said with finality.

"That means we're in the past. Your time is the real time. We're ancient, ignorant, dead savages. That's why we're not real. That's why our problems, our lives, don't matter. That's why the disaster that's going to happen in the next few hours is going to be merely an interesting spectacle. That's why, though you give as little as possible away, you talk with us as I might talk to some ignorant civilian Trojan, not even a soldier, who hasn't the faintest suspicion that the great wooden horse is full of men. If we're not too unimportant to talk to, we're too stupid."

She was sitting up again, startled. She was breathing deeply and suddenly flushed.

What I had done I didn't know. But whatever it was, it took effect -- as

if I, a foreigner, had suddenly spoken to her in her own language; or as if I'd kissed her the way Jota, no doubt, could have done.

She didn't say anything, yet I knew that I had got through to her. And I knew that Miranda was no longer a thousand miles or years out of my reach.

I leaned over and kissed her lightly. She did nothing. I kissed her again, more insistently, more demandingly.

"Let's go up to the house," she said, pushing me away. "Sheila can't be there, or you wouldn't be acting this way. I'm thirsty."

"So," I said, "am I . . . You might as well come up to the house, since you can't do what you were going to do here with me around, can you?"

"No," she admitted, and smiled.

It was the first real smile I'd had from her.

In the house, I tried to make her drink whisky, from ancient motives. But she wanted lemonade. It seemed to startle her when I put ice in it. Evidently this prehistoric method of chilling drinks was strange to her.

Standing in bare feet and a white bikini on the deep carpet of the lounge, she was out of place in a dozen ways. Although I had drawn the curtains in case anyone happened to look through the window, I was uneasy. "Would you like to borrow a dress?" I said. "If Sheila's things are too big for you, Dina's might fit."

"No, thanks," she said. "I'll swim back." A thought struck her. "Who's she?"

"My sister."

I wasn't telling her, I was reminding her. She must know about Dina.

But she didn't. It showed.

And I was startled. How could she know what she knew and not know about Dina?

I started asking questions again. "You didn't know about Dina? You didn't even know she existed? Yet you knew Jota would meet me at 3:10 this afternoon."

"Did I?"

"Greg did. And you wanted to meet him . . . you arrived precisely on cue."

"Tell me about Dina."

"Do you know about my mother?"

"Something . . . she's sick, isn't she?"

"If you want to use a euphemism, yes."

"And Dina?"

"Sick too -- using the same euphemism. Pretty, healthy, stable in her way. But that's the way of a child. That's how she'll stay."

"I wonder."

What do you mean, you wonder?"

She sat on a couch, drawing up her legs. "You're not sick -- in that way."

"If I am, I hope it doesn't show. But Sheila and I have no children."

"Why not?"

"Don't be dense."

"I think you're wrong. I think your children would be normal."

"And their children?"

She shrugged. "You know the difference between heredity and environment. If environment, illness, anything like that was the cause of what happened to your mother -- "

"It can't be."

"Why not?"

"Because of Dina."

She questioned me briefly but rather thoroughly about my mother, about Dina, about me.

Presently she smiled, and her smile was warmer now. "I knew you were sorry for yourself, Val," she said. "It shows. I didn't know you had so many good excuses for being sorry for yourself."

"Excuses?" I said.

"Oh, sure. Even if you're no psychologist, you know that self-pity is self-destruction. If you've only one leg and everybody else has two -- too bad, but self-pity can only make your situation worse."

"Thanks for the lecture," I said.

She smiled. "Don't do that," she said. "That's self-defense. You're putting up a barrier. It's not in the least necessary, because I'm not

trying to psychoanalyze you . . . "

"What else are you doing?"

She got up again and began to move about. I tried not to watch her, because she affected me almost as she would affect a lusty seventeen-year-old boy who had been in solitary confinement for a year. Yet it was impossible not to watch her.

"This is only 1966," she said. "It's not long since psychiatry was born. Clever men found out that many things which had always been assumed to be straightforward physical ailments were actually caused by mental factors. And, of course, they went too far. Now almost everything short of a broken leg or diptheria is supposed to be psychosomatic. Quite soon now other clever men will start swinging the pendulum again. Things in the blood other than alcohol can cause disturbances -- "

"Obviously," I said.

"And a great deal of what used to be called madness can be very simply dealt with."

"Loop it out of existence," I retorted. "It's easy."

"No, not that . . . I think there's something quick and easy that could cure Dina. Not your mother. She really is psychotic. Dina is . . . well, she just needs a certain stimulation -- I think. I can't be sure. It depends on whether there's anything fundamentally wrong in the heredity line. Hers and yours."

"Is there a way of finding out?"

She looked at me with sudden suspicion, and relaxed instantly. "There's a way I could find out about you," she said. "And your children, It's a rather curious way to find out such a thing . . . But it would be infallible. It would settle whether there was any chance of

your passing on . . . what you're afraid you might pass on."

"Will you do it?" I asked quickly.

She smiled and looked away. "You don't know what you're asking."

"What do you mean?"

"And because you don't know what you're asking . . . Turn around, Val."

Perhaps I was slow, but I hadn't the faintest idea what was coming. I thought she was going to hypnotize me or drug me, though where she'd get the drugs was quite a question.

A moment later she said: "All right. Turn back."

She was on the thick carpet, naked, her marvelous body twice as marvelous as even my heated imagination had been able to picture it.

She beld out her arms to me, yet like a fool I hesitated.

"This way?" I said stupidly.

"This is part of it. But if you're reluctant . . . "

I ran to her.

Chapter Five

I had read and heard of acts of love which were not merely sex, which were more even than the consummation of true love: timeless moments when two people met and were reborn. I had not believed such things could happen.

I didn't even love Miranda, and quite certainly she didn't love me. Yet what happened then and there shocked us, drained us, and left us two different people.

Although I was aware of none of the details, which were unimportant and probably quite conventional, I knew that she was as much taken aback as I was. I also vaguely understood why: it was only a few minutes before that I had made her see me as something more than a character in a play, and now we were together with a background of silent thunder.

We didn't discuss it; we didn't try to explain it or explain it away. It was not love, it was not passion. It was destiny. It was one of the moments, big or small, after which things are never quite the same again.

And we recognized this, dimly, yet with no possibility of pretense that nothing particular had happened.

Miranda's reaction didn't really surprise me, though I couldn't understand it. "Val," she said softly, "without meaning to, I've done something more tragic than Greg could ever manage to do."

I didn't reply. What was there to say to that?

She jumped up. "You must stay till I come back," she said.

Before I could emerge from euphoria -- which I had no particular desire to do, anyway -- she was gone.

I slept. When I awoke, Miranda was leaning over me, wearing her

white bikini.

"You needn't worry," she said. "Your children will be entirely normal. There isn't the slightest doubt."

Only in that moment did I realize how much I wanted children -- more than that, wanted Sheila and me to have children. Always when Sheila had said or hinted that things would be different if we had children I had been irritated at the irrelevance. Things would be different if I were seventy-five feet tall, or if Sheila were a man, or if I were a millionaire, or if we could have children.

All I said was: "You had that tested -- *that* way?"

She nodded. "In the circumstances, it was the only way. I could hardly . . ." She checked herself.

"You went to the copse."

"Perhaps."

"What about Dina?"

"I think I'll be seeing Dina." She was evasive. "I'll do something . . . she won't remember what, and it'll be better if nobody else knows."

She didn't want to talk any more. "I mustn't see you again, unless . . . No, I shan't see you again, Val. You're not going out tonight, and I . . . Goodby, Val."

She ran from the room. And I knew somehow that she meant goodby -- not au revoir.

By the time Sheila drove up, twenty minutes later, I had carefully removed all evidence that Miranda had been in the house. I left my own glass where it was, but washed hers and put it away.

I just didn't know how I'd act and how Sheila would act after what had happened. Not only had I been faithful to Sheila since we got married, I had been faithful to her since the day we met.

After hearing her mini drive up and stop, I waited in the hall. Sheila might guess what had happened the moment she saw my face . . . Belatedly I realized I should have found something to do, instead of simply standing waiting for Sheila with no prepared explanation of what I'd been doing all afternoon.

She came in and said: "What's her name, Val?"

"Miranda," I said. It would have been fatuous to ask what she was talking about, whose name she meant, and even more fatuous to ask how she had found out.

"Why did you do it, Val?" Sheila asked quietly. She should have waited for an answer, but she surrendered some of her advantage by going on: "I thought . . . with Dina out of the way for a while, we might have had a chance. Dina's the root of all the trouble, you know. All of it. You don't think so, but you don't have to put up with Dina at her worst, all day."

So we were talking about Dina, not Miranda, and the heat was temporarily off.

"Lots of people have in-law trouble," I said rather weakly.

"Yes, but not this kind of trouble," said Sheila bleakly. "If she was a cripple, I could speak to her plainly and reach some kind of understanding. If she was old I could at least try to manage her. But she's just . . . well, you know."

"I know."

"I hate her, Val, do you know that? She does. Of course, she hates me, so we're even. But she hated me first."

Some people could ignore dislike. Sheila wasn't one of them. She couldn't be indifferent.

She went back to Miranda then, trying to work up the fury she had felt earlier. But it was too late. And I had realized with relief that she wasn't talking about Miranda and me in the lounge an hour ago, but Miranda and me in the Red Lion earlier.

"Did you have to humiliate me, Val?" she demanded. "Did you have to take her where everybody knows you, and me? Couldn't you have taken her to some hotel out of town?"

"You've got it wrong, Sheila," I said.

"Of course. Obviously. What else could be expected? She's a rich client, the daughter of the Earl of Shoreditch."

"She's one of the giants," I said.

"The what? Oh, those kids. Don't be ridiculous. I hear she's about the same height as me."

"I mean, she's with them. Listen, Sheila. There's something very strange happening here in Shuteley, something fantastic. This afternoon Jota was killed. I might have been killed too, but instead I killed my opponent -- "

"Killed?" She stared at me. "Jota dead?"

I explained what had happened. She listened, yet I knew I wasn't getting through to her. It wasn't that she disbelieved what I said. It was rather that she was the kind of woman, the kind of womanly woman,

who saw her own family and household and everything that affected them in technicolor and everything else in black and white. The giants were all black and white, except Miranda, who had lunched with me at the Red Lion. Besides, she wasn't a giant.

It might have made a difference to Sheila's attitude, I thought, if Miranda had been six feet four. Then she'd have been a freak and anything I did might have been laughed off as temporary aberration, as if I had fallen desperately in love with the fat lady of a traveling circus.

"Anyway," I said, "they'll be gone tomorrow."

"How do you know?"

"I told you. Greg said -- "

"And you believe everything you're told?"

"Sheila, these giants know things. One of the things . . . "

"Well, go on."

"They say," I muttered, "that I needn't worry about my children. That there's no reason why they shouldn't be normal. And I believe it's true."

Sheila's head came up quickly. For a moment there was radiance in her face. She had fought against my decision, not so much because she wanted children, though she did, as because she believed we needed them.

Then the radiance died. "Who told you -- Miranda?"

"As a matter of fact, yes."

"And anything she says must be true?"

"It's not like that."

"Isn't it?" She paused, and then asked: "Is she very beautiful?"

"Very. But she'll be gone tomorrow too."

"So you have to make hay while the sun shines?"

The phone rang. "I'll get it," I said at once, too quickly, for Sheila looked at me calculatingly. Invariably she answered the phone, even if I was at home, because I wasn't often called at home and if I was, her answering it gave me a chance to think or pretend not to be home.

She was doing me an injustice this time, for the possibility that Miranda might be calling had not crossed my mind.

It was, in fact, Jota.

"Haven't much time," he said. "I'm out for a stroll with some of the giants . . . Val, something happens tonight. They haven't said anything definite -- I guessed from the way they talk about tomorrow, as if everything's going to be different."

He wasn't telling me anything I didn't know.

"Good? Bad?" I said.

"They're excited. That's all I can say. Except -- they seem to think they're going to do me a good turn. I think now they let me stay with them so that they'd know where I was and could keep an eye on me. One other thing -- go out. Take Sheila with you. Go right away. Don't waste any time."

"Why?"

"I don't know why. Think they tell me everything? But I gather you're supposed to stay at home tonight. It's taken for granted. It's assumed

you *must* stay at home."

"Then I suppose I must," I said.

"Don't be an idiot. Why give in? They think you'll stay at home. So go out. Don't be a vegetable."

"Jota," I said. "What you and Greg were saying to each other . . . that must be important. What exactly did you mean when -- "

Jota chuckled and rang off.

"So it wasn't Miranda," said Sheila. "What a disappointment for you."

"Sheila," I said, "lets go out for dinner."

"And we'll happen to run into Miranda."

"Don't be silly. You pick the place. Right out of town somewhere. Sheila . . . I love you."

She looked at me doubtfully, suspiciously. But I met her gaze fair and square.

It was hypocritical, telling Sheila I loved her so soon after what had happened. I was quite certain that what had happened between Miranda and me would never happen again. She had called it tragic . . . anyway, she had called something tragic. We had met without meeting, and then suddenly in an explosion of feeling we had fused in one way and been blown apart in another.

"We never go out to dinner," Sheila said.

That reminded me: Miranda, not just Jota, had said "You're not going out tonight." That was another of the things she knew. It wasn't in the cards that I would leave the house again that day.

"We're going this time," I said. "Go and get yourself all dolled up. There isn't a girl in Shuteley who can hold a candle to you when you really try."

"Except Miranda, of course."

"Miranda isn't in Shuteley. I don't think she's anywhere."

Although this puzzled Sheila, it also seemed to satisfy her.

I rushed Sheila. She wanted to spend hours getting ready, as women do. She took it for granted she'd have a bath and do all the other things that had to be done, and we'd get out about seven or eight or nine.

But I thought, I had a feeling, that if we didn't sidestep fate, we'd lose the chance. Maybe twenty giants would arrive and keep us at home by force.

And as we closed the front door and walked to the car -- my car -- I was certain there had been something behind that feeling, for I felt myself wakening up. A moment before I had felt tired and rather disinclined to go out after all, and if I hadn't been hustling Sheila, if there had been any easy way to change my mind, I'd have been quite content to stay at home watching television instead.

We drove to Shutdey and southwards across country to a new roadhouse, the Orbit, on the nearest main road. We had been there just once before, for a drink.

We talked only casually. Miranda wasn't mentioned, nor the giants, nor Jota, nor Dina. And all the chill between us gradually melted. I realized in wonder that I liked being with Sheila, that we were going to enjoy ourselves. It had been like this before we were married, and for a short, a very short time afterwards.

I was happier than I had been for years. Sheila and I would have children. We'd become a family. There must be some solution to the problem of Dina, if we really worked on it. Perhaps it would be a tough one -- she might have to be shown, with brutal directness if necessary, that if Sheila and I couldn't live our lives in peace with her around, Dina couldn't be allowed to stay around.

Curiously, although I completely accepted Miranda's statement that I could have normal children, I left her promise that something would be done about Dina entirely in the air. I didn't even think about it again. That I could have a family without fear was, after all, not hard to believe. It had been doubts that had been set at rest, not certainties. Dina turning into a normal teenager was something more in the nature of a miracle.

A mile or so short of the roadhouse, Sheila said: "We're far too early, Val. There won't be a soul there, and it's too soon for dinner. Let's stop for a while."

So I drove off the road.. .

Married couples abandon pre-marital parked-car behavior for a hundred excellent reasons. Kids stay parked for hours, not necessarily misbehaving themselves, because they've nowhere else to go. After marriage, many couples try to recapture magic moments in cars parked at favorite spots . . . but even if they stay in love, it can't be the same.

Yet Sheila and I, just off the road, in broad daylight, managed to go back. We did nothing more than hold hands and talk, yet it was the same as it used to be -- half an hour was a minute. We talked about nothing at all, certainly not about Miranda or Jota or Dina.

We moved on in the end only because, despite the magic, we were hungry. And the magic needn't necessarily fly away.

By this time I had made up my mind irrevocably about Dina.

Something which she couldn't help was strangling her life. But it couldn't be allowed to strangle three lives instead of one.

The roadhouse was long and low. The noise from it as I parked the car rather took me aback, because we'd thought it was a fairly quiet place. Then I realized that on such a hot night all the windows were wide open.

Sheila had put on a new dress, and I didn't get the effect until she emerged from the ladies' room. She flushed with pleasure as I looked at her, knowing that I meant what I looked.

She wore a short green dress with just enough cleavage, and I saw in wonder that she was much more beautiful than she had been the last time I looked at her in this way. A business associate who had married a lovely girl and then divorced her had told me once, over a drink, that he had never wanted her more than when he saw her for the first time after she had remarried.

I was lucky. I was having the same sort of experience, only for me it wasn't too late.

I tried not to think of Miranda, and then, as Sheila went ahead to our table, I let myself think Of Miranda . . . and Sheila didn't suffer by comparison after all.

Miranda was the actress in the safari picture. Her perfection had the same unreality. She wasn't a girl who worked wonders with nothing at all. She had access to tricks far beyond anything available even to the girl in the safari picture.

Sheila didn't have any tricks. And Sheila was my wife.

We had a wonderful time. It was easily the best evening we had ever spent together. And with every second together, we came closer.

Only once more during the evening, while Sheila and I were dancing,

did Miranda come to mind. And it was with gratitude, for I knew that if I had not somehow been released that day, Sheila and I would not be spending this evening, this kind of evening together.

We didn't prolong the evening greedily. We knew that unlike kids out on such a date, we didn't have to part afterwards. We could go home -- and to a home without Dina.

So it was not long after ten when we got back in the car and started to drive home.

"What's that, Val?" Sheila said idly.

I stared, and then put my foot hard down.

The sky ahead of us was on fire.

I'd seen fires at night before. Quite often they look far worse than they are. An empty barn aflame can light the sky, over a hill, like a burning town.

But this was something more than a burning barn. We could see flames shooting high, flames and smoke -- and Shuteley was still ten miles away.

The flames that seemed to be shooting miles into the sky really were what they seemed.

At once it all fell into place. The giants *knew* . Now I understood Greg's visit and his bizarre idea of insuring against disaster in the next twenty-four hours. Of course he hadn't meant to collect. He hadn't even meant to have the policy drawn up. He had merely been amusing himself.

Other things began to assume more significance. Miranda had *known* . I'd stay at home, and I'd gone out partly to make her wrong. Had she

known then I'd die? Or had she been thinking something quite different, that I'd be safe out of it, because the Queen Anne house was in a bend in the river hundreds of yards from the town?

Dina . . . my heart missed a beat. Gil's house was in the middle of old timbered houses in the oldest part of town.

Then, with hope, I remembered that Miranda knew where Dina was and had said she expected to see her later.

The giants, who had known all about this fire, surely didn't propose simply to stand and watch, did they?

"What is it, Val?" Sheila said, and for a moment I thought she didn't even realize Shuteley was on fire. But then she added: "What are you thinking about?" and I knew that she'd been watching my face.

"About the giants," I said.

"You mean -- they did this?"

I hadn't been thinking that, and still didn't, on the whole. It seemed far more likely that, knowing this was going to happen, they had booked their seats for the show in advance. Maybe last week they'd watched the Great Fire of London, seeing St. Paul's burned down, and eighty-seven parish churches, and 13,200 homes.

At the thought, I jerked convulsively and so did the car. The Great Fire was in 1666. This was 1966, the three hundredth anniversary of the London disaster. Could that be coincidence? Or did it, in a twisted way, explain everything?

"Sheila," I said. "Can you remember the date of the Great Fire of London?"

"Sixteen something," she said wonderingly.

"No, I mean the day and the month."

"You must be kidding," she said.

It was a possibility that the giants were teenage vandals of time, destroying for the sake of destruction and doing it on a scale beyond belief. Things I knew made this possible too -- the way, for example, in which the giants, even Miranda until a few short hours ago, obviously regarded Shuteley and the people in it as mere shadows of living creatures.

Was that what Miranda had meant when she used the word tragic -- tragic because suddenly, because of what had happened between us, she realized that the people of Shuteley were something more than names fading from ancient gravestones?

But then I remembered a small item in a TV program some weeks ago, unimportant at the time. That had been the exact anniversary of the Great Fire. It was past. So this wasn't just a fantastic, manufactured playback for the giants' amusement, three centuries later.

"Talk to me, Val," said Sheila. "And don't drive so fast. You nearly went off the road at the last corner."

I slowed a little. As we approached Shuteley the fire seemed to spread until it was all around us, although that couldn't be so.

"Shuteley," I said. "The most old-fashioned town in England. Oh, afterwards it's always easy to see . . . the Titanic, instead of being unsinkable, was constructed so that if a certain thing happened she absolutely *had* to sink. The Lusitania acted as if she wanted to be sunk, paying no attention to instructions and being in one of the last places she ought to have been. At Pearl Harbor, half a dozen warnings were ignored, disbelieved, and what should have been expected was an unbelievable shock -- "

"What are you talking about?" she asked, bewildered.

"Fire risk. Well, who should know better than me? Naturally, every new building in Shuteley has to conform to all the latest safety regulations. Modifications are always being made in all the old houses. But how much has it amounted to? Shuteley's the most inflammable town in England -- perhaps in Europe."

"You mean, a fire only had to start, and it would be bad?"

"Something like that." My thoughts were jumbled. Sometimes I thought the giants had done it all, with my black-haired playmate Snow White as the schemer-in-chief. Then I found myself dismissing the giants as an irrelevance, mere spectators.

"Gradually, of course, the risks have been lessening," I said. "But you know Shuteley . . . changes that would take ten years anywhere else take fifty in Shuteley. And this summer there's been hardly any rain. Not only the town is bone dry, but the grass, the bushes, the trees. The river's as low as it has ever been."

"You think it's very bad, don't you?" Sheila said quietly.

I did, though in an oddly theoretical, uncommitted way. So far I was only guessing.

So I mused: "Maybe this is the fire that's going to change our whole conception of safety measures. When the Titanic sank; there was no rule that there had to be lifeboat accommodation for every passenger. The company thought they'd done pretty well because they'd done far more than the regulations demanded . . . We did the same. I'm sure of it. A lot more could have been done in Shuteley."

After a pause, thinking of the giants again, I said bitterly: "I should have known. I had all the clues."

"What could you have done?"

"Nothing, I suppose. I don't know. Tried to get the police to move the giants on, perhaps. Watch them. Make sure they didn't have a chance to do any damage."

"Then you do think they did it."

"I don't how. But if they didn't start the fire, they knew it was going to happen."

"Miranda too?" She said it quite evenly, with no detectable malice.

"Miranda too," I said bleakly.

It seemed to take an interminable time to drive ten miles. The road was narrow and winding, It was not possible to average more than forty, and in trying to do the journey too quickly I was losing time, and knew it, and lost more time trying to make it up. By this time I had realized we'd have reached Shuteley sooner if I'd asked Sheila to drive. My brain was too involved with other considerations to allow me to drive well. But I didn't want to stop now to let her take over. The time lost might be greater than the time saved.

"I never knew this road was so long," I groaned.

"What can you do when you get there?"

"I don't how. At least make sure the firemen, the police, everybody involved, know about the giants, if they don't already."

"Val," said Sheila quietly, "calm down. Think -- no matter how bad it looks, it's only a fire -- "

"Only a fire!" I almost screamed.

"Please, Val . . . Shuteley doesn't consist entirely of wooded houses. You said yourself safety modifications are always being made. Spaces have been cleared. And we have a modern firefighting service, with the latest

equipment. You know that as well as I do. Better."

Her calm words took effect, although we now smelt smoke, burning wood, burning rubber, and -- I hoped I was imagining this -- burning flesh.

Of course she was right -- despite the inferno we were driving towards, the orange gouts of flame shooting high into the dark sky, the billowing clouds of smoke pouring upwards, the sudden spurts of flame which told of oil explosions or gas leaks.

What we were seeing, the red-orange-yellow glow which made driving difficult, dimming the headlights, must, simply had to be, far worse in appearance than it was in actuality. It looked as if we were approaching a city the size of Manchester ablaze from end to end. And Shuteley would be lost in a suburb of Manchester.

I took a bend with a screaming of tires and for a minute or two, frustratingly, we were tearing along at right-angles to the blaze, getting no nearer. There was a slight rise just this side of the river, which meant that we wouldn't get a direct view of the town until we were within two hundred yards of the Suspension Bridge.

Yet as Sheila said, it couldn't be all that bad. Shuteley being a town in which fires that did occur could be more serious more quickly than in other places, the fire-fighting service was that much more efficient and better equipped. In the Great Fire of London there could have been little the Londoners could do except throw buckets of water over smoldering timbers. In Shuteley, a great deal of damage was undoubtedly being done, lives might be lost, but the outbreak would be contained.

I remembered Dina again, and caught my breath as I found myself thinking that if she died, one problem was solved . . .

No. I didn't want problems to be solved that way.

At last I reached the end of the straight and was able to turn towards the maelstrom again. Suddenly I braked, briefly, as I saw something across the road.

Sheila screamed and cut her scream off abruptly. I was able to slow the car enough to hit the obstruction gently, but not enough to stop short of it. It looked like molten lava flowing sullenly across the road . . .

There was a brief check, nothing more. It was water flowing across, turned dull red by the glow in the sky.

The car hit the last rise, and we both coughed. We were breathing thick wood-smoke. My eyes stung so fiercely so quickly that I braked again, braked harder as a cloud of smoke swept across the road, obscuring everything.

Yet it was a practically windless night, and most of the smoke and flames rose straight up. Nor was there even a breeze to fan the flames. That was something.

Then we were over the hill, almost at the river, and we saw the hell that was Shuteley.

Chapter Six

When you try to burn damp garden refuse, you have to create fierce heat before the green twigs, sappy cuttings and weeds begin to smoke, smolder and finally burn. Yet no matter how wet everything is, the greedy maw of a roaring fire will in the end swallow everything.

In Shuteley that summer night, everything inflammable or uninflammable was as dry as tinder. Everything that would burn was ready to do so at the first touch of flame; everything that wouldn't was neutral in the onslaught, neither helping nor hindering.

All along the river on the other side, buildings blazed as if they'd been prepared for a fire display and then touched off at a dozen points. Orange flame painted the gaunt shells of buildings which were all that was left along the riverside. Every few seconds, above the crackling roar of burning wood, there was a crash as somewhere masonry collapsed.

Nothing could be alive across the river from us. If anyone by some mirade escaped alive from any of those blazing buildings, there was no sanctuary in narrow streets swept with flame. I could only hope that the people who had been in these houses, the most densely populated part of the town, had already managed to get out.

Nothing could be alive. In such a furnace, even a fireman in full protective clothing would collapse and melt like a tallow candle.

"The whole town," Sheila whispered beside me. "Everything's burning."

There's nothing left."

She was right: the fire stretched on both sides to the limits of the town, and although we could see practically nothing through the wall of fire, the flames and smoke which gushed into the red sky showed that behind what we could see the fire was just as intense.

Where we were, a hundred yards from the river and looking across it to a strip of scorched earth and stone and concrete that could burn no more -- perhaps three hundred yards from the nearest flame -- we were facing a blast of heat that would have killed us in time and must already have been toasting us, although we were protected by the car's body and were looking through glass. But we were too fascinated to draw back.

Only after we had seen all there was to be seen on the other side of the river did we look closer.

Sheila gasped. The Suspension Bridge was buckled, twisted, still spanning the river but with its metals glowing and a huge pile of rubble in the river bed below it.

The river was practically dry. Only thin crimson trickles ran through the mud and stones and weeds.

To the left, the New Bridge was piled high with masonry and still-burning timber. The warehouses across the river had collapsed into the dry bed.

There were people and machines this side of the New Bridge, a few hundred yards along from where we stood, but I had little attention to spare yet for this side of the river, where there were few buildings and those not on fire.

Instead I looked the other way -- and saw that the Old Bridge was down. It lay shattered in the bed of the river, an astonishingly vast pile of rubble, apparently the blockage that was holding back the river. But that way I couldn't see distinctly, because something close to the Old Bridge on the opposite side was shooting out dense clouds of smoke.

And I began to realize the full horror of the situation, which I had scarcely thought, a moment ago, could be worse.

There were two footbridges beyond the bridges I could see, but both were partly wooden and it could be taken for granted they were impassable. And the next nearest bridge was twenty miles away.

Shuteley was a backwater at the best of times. Yet in the middle of a well-populated country, the town could never have been described as isolated -- until now.

The main road, the big Midland towns, the rest of England were reached from this side. On the other, lanes meandered through villages, brooks, farms, woods. Of course help could reach the town that way, but it would take hours. And this was a lightning fire.

Sheila was pulling at my arm, trying to make me reverse back over the hill. But before I did anything else, I looked back at the New Bridge.

It was hard to see exactly what was going on there, because sheds and warehouses cut off the view and at this point there was no road along the bank. But I saw two fire engines and men in gleaming helmets.

And they were on this side of the river.

I tried to start the car, and only after several seconds did I realize I'd never killed the motor. I put the car in reverse . . .

There were two faint pops and the front settled. At the same time, I noticed steam rising from the front of the car. Above all the other burning smells, I smelt burning rubber.

Protected by the car, I hadn't realized that the fierce heat from across the river was capable of melting the tires and boiling the water in the radiator.

However, the car did move jerkily, and in a few seconds we were back over the brow of the hill, protected by it.

"What can we do?" Sheila said.

Well, what could we do? Nothing, probably. Nobody could do anything that I could see -- it was too late for any measures that I could imagine.

It was ironic and symbolic, rather than really important, that the firemen were trapped this side of the river. Certainly they could do nothing if they crossed the bridge -- if it were possible to cross the bridge. The fire engines were rubber-shod, like my car, and there was water in the radiators. Anyway, firemen in conventional uniform couldn't get near a conflagration like that.

Since the only sign of life we had seen had been at this end of the New Bridge, I turned the car, and running on the rims, with a steaming radiator, drove along the lane behind the warehouses.

I stopped.

Here in the semi-gloom, lit by the blaze in the sky but unaffected by the outbreak as yet, were old huts, sheds, stores. And in the lane in front of us, blazing fiercely, was a wood beam a foot thick and three feet long.

We got out of the car and looked at the blazing balk rather helplessly. Thrown into the sky from the other side of the river, no doubt, it had fallen precisely in the middle of the lane and was spluttering harmlessly. Even a small spark, falling on a tarred felt roof, would have started a blaze on this side of the river too. A fire on this side would never rival the destruction of Shuteley itself, but would make this night of destruction appallingly complete.

I found a spade in a shed and covered the balk with earth and stones. Without much of a struggle, the fire went out. But I was almost certainly wasting my time. If a great blazing balk of timber could be thrown a quarter of a mile, millions of equally dangerous sparks must be coming over all the

time. Indeed, I could see them flying across the sky.

Sheila caught my ann. "Val, please," she said. "Let's go back."

"Back?" I echoed blankly, wondering whether she meant to the place just over the hill where we had watched our town being burned to death, or to the roadhouse, or to our home a quarter of a mile along the river on the side we were on.

"Anywhere," she said. "We can't do anything here. No one can."

It was true, of course. The firemen we were trying to join couldn't do anything. Fires differ in kind rather than merely in degree. You can spit on a tiny fire and put it out. A fire in a long-unused grate won't go, despite all your efforts and the fact that you're using specially selected combustible material.

But when the temperature goes up, when water boils, when rubber smolders, when wood, untouched by flame, gradually glows and blazes through the effect of high temperature alone, when human beings simply can't go near . . . that's a fire that simply has to be left alone.

As if to reinforce what Sheila was saying, a flying spark dropped and imbedded itself in her fur wrap. She threw it off, and I stamped on, it. And then, startlingly, we were drenched in a shower of water.

"Rain!" I exclaimed. "If it would only pour -- "

Sheila, in her green dress which was short top and bottom, soaked, didn't shiver. "Hot rain?" she murmured, puzzled.

I took her arm. She wanted to escape, to leave the fire to burn itself out, which was sensible but impossible. With the other arm I picked up her wrap, and pushed it rather roughly around her. Then we went on.

The men at this end of the New Bridge were nearly all firemen. There were a few children, a few old men.

The firemen, protected from the direct blast of the heat by the very obstruction which kept them from attempting to cross the bridge, were spraying water this side of the river, which was sensible. Jets directed across the river would not even land. Anyway, the jets they were directing were more like trickles, possibly of some value on this side of the river, of none if directed the other way.

I recognized Fire Officer Sayell, brother of the wit of my office.

"How did it start?" I asked.

His face twitched in annoyance, and I realized how silly my question was. Undoubtedly later there would be an investigation, and it might even be possible to establish the original cause of the fire. Meantime there were a million things that mattered more.

"Excuse me, Mr. Mathers," he said, and I recognized the carefully controlled tone of a man near the end of his tether, impotent, with an impossible job on his hands. "There's not much I can do, but I've got to get on with it anyway."

"There's help coming?"

"Lots of it. Mostly to the other side. Nobody can do anything much here. We've tried the ladders. They don't reach the other side, not from any place we can put the tenders."

It would not, I thought, have made much difference if the ladders had spanned the bed. Nobody could go across there and live. Anyway, the steel ladders would buckle in the heat.

Sayell swore as one of the jets failed, closely followed by the other.

"Everything's wrong," he said bitterly. "The river's dried up. Blocked higher up."

"How about the Winshell brook?" Sheila suggested.

"Dry before this happened. Dry yesterday."

"Have you looked?" I demanded.

He stared at me with desperation in his eyes. The interference of local VIPs was another penultimate straw.

"No, I haven't bloody looked," he snapped. "The bloody brook was dry when the river was still -- "

"Send somebody," I said.

Suddenly quiet, he said: "Do you want me to hit you, Mr. Mathers? Do you want me to cleave your skull with my axe? Because so help me -- "

"Send somebody to look," I said, and turned slightly away. If I tried to outface him, maybe he would cleave my skull with his axe. Many men with impossible jobs on their hands get like Sayell then. A breath of opposition sends them into spontaneous combustion.

But if someone says casually "Do so-and-so," and moves on, they've got something to try, something that isn't likely to make the situation any worse and might improve it. And if it fails utterly, it's not their fault.

Behind me, Sayell shouted: "Horner! Take a look over the hill and try the Winshell brook. And look lively!"

The Winshell brook was a tiny tributary of the Shute. It went the wrong way, meeting the river head on rather than quietly trickling into it. The meeting place, called not unexpectedly The Meeting of the Waters, was only a short distance downriver from where we stood.

I had remembered the water running across the road.

At the giants' camp, at our house, probably even just beyond the mound of

debris at the Old Bridge which I had glimpsed through the smoke, the river was still running. It was only in Shuteley itself, at the moment when it was most needed, that it had run dry. But all that water was still flowing somewhere; some of it, though not nearly enough, was still getting through along the old river bed. Some of it was perhaps going on the other side of the river, doing something to limit the blaze. That was unlikely, however, because it would have to get round Castle Hill.

The rest of it must be flowing along the other side of the hill which for so many miles had cut off our view of Shuteley. And the Winshell brook was there.

The human animal has survived, and will continue to survive, because of its enormous talent for adaptation -- and rapid adaptation at that.

We were living in a world of smoke which stung our eyes and made breathing always difficult, sometimes painful and occasionally impossible.

We were living in a world of heat which made sweat run from us continuously. We were all so thirsty that we would have drunk anything, even the muddy crimson trickles that were still meandering down the river bed.

We were living in a world where thirst, pain, hunger and comfort had to be set apart. All of us had small burns where sparks had landed. Several of us had small smoldering spots in our clothes which we beat out absently. We were hungry from our exertions, at least I was, but that didn't mean the thought of eating was present. Drinking was different. All of us, given the chance, would have knocked down a pint or two of water, milk, lemonade, beer, anything. We couldn't say drinking no longer mattered. We'd have drunk greedily if we could. But if we couldn't, it would have to wait.

We were living in a nightmare world where only one thing could be held in the mind at one time. At the moment it was the Winshell brook. Even Sayell, who had wanted to kill me for bothering him, was waiting, praying.

If there was water, something could be done. Without water, stuck across

the river from the fire (which nobody for the moment was looking at) we could do nothing but watch this side of Shuteley, such as it was, burn with the rest.

It was no use thinking of what had happened and was still happening across the river. Apparently these firemen knew little more than I did about that.

Our wives, children, parents, friends and lovers were over there, dead or alive. Either they'd escaped when the fire started (whenever that was) or they were still there, forever, unrecognizable.

I suppose I was the luckiest of all those people there. Sheila was with me, and Sheila, despite everything, was the human being I cared most about. Sheila and I were going to live. If necessary we could run from the holocaust and save ourselves.

We had no children, and at that moment I had never been more glad of anything. Sheila's parents were dead, and the remaining parent I had was far from Shuteley.

There was only Dina to worry about. And Gil, perhaps.

As for others . . . Well, through being faithful to Sheila and her alone, I had become unconcerned with most of the people in Shuteley. In the office, I was concerned chiefly about Sally Henrey, and she was on holiday, out of this altogether. Of course I'd be sorry about many others, but they weren't close, apart from Gil. And was he close any more?

Somebody screamed, and I turned. As if thrown by an ancient catapult, a blazing mass of timber was flying in a leisurely parabola across the dry river, straight for us.

I grabbed Sheila and pulled her to the left. But we bumped into two very solid firemen and bounced the other way. The timber crashed on the ground twenty yards from us.

Nobody was near it. Everybody had had plenty of time to get clear. But

when it hit the ground it flew asunder into a thousand blazing sparks which exploded in all directions, and the curses and screams of those hit by the sparks temporarily drowned the noises from across the river.

A couple of brands dug into my clothes, and obstinately stuck. I was trying to brush them off when a scream from Sheila made me look at her and see that a spark was clinging like a leech to the front of her dress. I tore off my jacket, still with a smoldering patch in it, and plucked away the spark and some of her dress, whereupon Sheila promptly fainted.

I could have sworn she had her fur wrap on, but either it had slipped off unnoticed or she had thrown it away in the broiling heat. Picking her up, I carried her behind the shelter of one of the sheds. The spark on my leg had fallen off, though not before burning through to the skin. The pain was sharp and more like a stab wound than a burn.

I put Sheila down. She'd been lucky. There was no sign of a burn.

I pulled up a leg of my pants and saw to my astonishment that the considerable pain in my leg was caused by a tiny burn no larger than a pinprick.

Sheila opened her eyes. She didn't move. "Val," she said, "am I badly burned?"

"You aren't burned at all," I said bluntly. Reassured, she jumped up, and wailed when she saw that the left top half of her dress was torn away.

"Where's your wrap?" I demanded.

"I can't wear it in this heat. It's -- "

"Find it, put it on and keep it on."

"Sparks stick in it."

"I know, but . . . "

I was beginning to realize that though it was reassuring to have your wife with you in such a situation, and many men who found themselves alone at this moment would have given their right arms to be as fortunate as I was, a fully feminine girl like Sheila kept your hands full and you'd scarcely time even to see what was going on.

So I said: "Look, Sheila, the best thing you can do is gather all the kids and old folk together and take them back over the hill, where it's safe, and just stay there. A lot of people were burned and injured unnecessarily just now. They needn't have been here."

"And what are you going to do?" she demanded.

I shrugged. I didn't know. If the firemen were helpless, it wasn't likely I'd be able to do anything useful. But I had to try. I had to be there. If I could do nothing else, I had to stand and watch.

"What will this mean to your job?" Sheila said.

Trust a woman to be practical. The thought seemed to come from a thousand miles away.

But I was responsible for practically all the insurance in Shuteley -- and the San Francisco disaster that wrecked insurance companies among other things was a minor affair compared with this. True, Shuteley wasn't a big town. But never in history, save by act of war, had any town been so completely destroyed as Shuteley obviously would be before this was over.

Behind us there was a shout. And we ran back, for at such a time the last thing we expected to hear was a shout of excitement and delight.

When we saw the firemen talking to Sayell and gesticulating, we didn't have to hear what they were saying. There was water in the Winshell brook, and plenty of it.

It was remarkable how merely having something they could do transformed

the firemen from a dispirited, cursing, demoralized mob no more useful than the children and old people who still stood around into an efficient well-drilled team.

A squad raced up the hill with their equipment, and Sayell turned to me; his face alight. "Thanks, Mr. Mathers," he said. "If it hadn't been for you, we might never have looked at the brook. I never guessed it would be . . . anyway, we're in business again."

Significantly he turned to look at the fire on the other side of the river, which for some time he had been ignoring. Then he turned back, shouting orders.

I sent Sheila to do as I'd suggested, and saw that she too became efficient once she had something useful to do. She waved to me as she shepherded the children and old people over the hill . . . and that was the last I saw of her while the Great Fire raged.

Soon the firemen had a water supply again. Wisely they first doused our own side of the river. The powerful jets of the two engines could reach practically every building on this side without having to move.

For the first time I had a good look at the blocked New Bridge. It was badly damaged and twisted, yet after the fire it might remain serviceable as a bridge, once the debris on it had been cleared. It was all too clear, however, that there was no chance of clearing it while the fire still raged. Some of the stones were still glowing red, and there was smoldering wood in the pile. In any case, I estimated that without bulldozers it would take a hundred men two days to clear the bridge.

Without bulldozers . . . We were in farming country, and although all the resources of Shuteley itself were on the other side of the river, there were plenty of farms this side.

I raced to a callbox. There was one among the sheds not a hundred yards

away. I picked up the receiver . . .

As I might have guessed, it was dead. The exchange was in Shuteley. In any case, water, debris and heat must have put the overhead wires to the box out of service long since.

There was a callbox about a mile back, and it might be working. Sayell should know about communications. Probably, I realized, he was in constant radio contact with his headquarters.

I ran back and tried to talk to him, But he was busy and waved me away. My suggestion about the brook had enabled him to be busy; he was quite certain, however, that I could not repeat the triumph.

The jets had been turned across the river, and rather unexpectedly they had made some impression. On the other side a fairly large semicircular area was free of fire, partly because nearly everything that would burn was already consumed, certainly everything highly inflammable, and partly because, being next to the river, its mean temperature was not as high as areas in the center of the holocaust. The water as it fell still rose in clouds of steam in places, but as the cooling jets played everywhere, the glow of heat was fading and the redness of everything visible was now a reflection of the flames still leaping farther back.

Indeed, the eye had now become used to the overall redness and canceled it out, just as, when one wears dark glasses, it is possible after a while to see colors as they really are. Everything was red. But blue-red didn't look the same as green-red.

There was less smoke than I'd have imagined. Although my eyes stung and watered all the time, that too could be ignored, like the various smells, and for a long time I had not choked, coughed, or been out of breath. I suspected that there must, after all, be a slight breath of air away from us. Perhaps it was a breeze created only by the fire, sucking air from our side.

The firemen were now attempting a desperate enterprise. Now that there was an apparent toehold across in the blazing town, one of the engines was

going to attempt to cross the dry river bed.

Personally I thought the attempt was several kinds of a mistake. The last few minutes had shown that the two engines, given an adequate supply of water, could accomplish something from this side of the river. They had won back a little from the fire. And even if it was scorched earth that they gained, an area that the fire had finished with and no longer wanted, even if the area represented only a fraction of one per cent of the total area of Shuteley, the process could be repeated. Unfortunately there was no road along this side of the bank, but the engines could travel along the lanes and reach the bank from other vantage points, the one from which we had first seen the fire, for example, and do what they had done here.

The ladders could be used to enable water to be sprayed over a wide area on the other side. Of course it would turn to steam, but that was all right: it took about six times as much heat to convert water to steam as it did to raise it to boiling point.

Also I thought, that it was too soon to attempt to cross to an area which had so recently been red with inner heat. Water falling on hot stone or metal draws off surface heat, but the glow wells up again to the surface. I doubted that even the firemen in their asbestos boots could stand anywhere across the river yet, and I was quite certain that the rubber tires of the machines would be burned off them in seconds. And although the heat here was just bearable (because we had to bear it), we had been insulated all along by the breadth of the river, which, though dry, had never burned. Across the river the firemen would be on ground which had only recently been surrendered by the flames, and that much nearer the heart of the blaze and its fierce, searing heat.

Besides, I didn't think the vehicles had one chance in a hundred of making the crossing. They were ordinary fire tenders, designed rather for getting to the scene of an outbreak at top speed than crossing impossible terrain. They might cross grass or rough country, but they weren't tanks or tractors. They had four rubber-shod wheels (intact, true, because someone had had the sense to shield the vehicles with wet tarpaulins) and they were heavy.

The bed of the river was a U -- not a deep U, for the Shute was never deep, not even where it ran into the much larger river that flowed on to the sea. Yet the Shute was no brook. It had flowed steadily along the same course for thousands of years, millions for all anyone knew, and the bed had gradually deepened, silted in the middle, perhaps, but with ever-steepening outer walls.

Even if a tender could drive down one side of the bank and cross the swampy bed, could it ever get up the incline on the other side?

I was certain it couldn't.

Sayell, however, was determined. He wasn't going to wait, either. A dozen men were stamping along the bank, grassy here, trying to establish where best to make the attempt.

A fleeting thought occurred to me. Sayell was probably no fool, even if his brother was. He was probably reasonably well trained in fire-fighting techniques. But he was no genius, and the situation which faced him had never faced anybody before.

Fires don't wait for the experts, the bosses, the generals, politicians and scientists to turn up. In an hour or two this area would be swarming with people -- all of whom could have handled the situation better than any of us, between cups of tea. I remembered, irreverently but not irrelevantly, how Gulliver put out the Lilliputians' fire. Some man-mountain could have done the same for us, if only he happened to be there.

Unfortunately, we were right out of man-mountains at the present time. Chance had elected poor honest not-too-bright John Sayell as the man in charge. And I knew already, he'd be pilloried. Whatever he did, he should have done better. If Shuteley was annihilated -- and anyone from this side of the river could see it already was -- well, he couldn't have done worse.

But he still didn't have to commit the criminal irresponsibility of staking all on the impossible, thus abandoning the small, yet important, things which were possible.

I strode through his crew. "Sayell . . . " I said.

The look he turned on me was that of a tortured man. "Mr. Mathers," he said, being civil with an enormous effort, "you've done two good things tonight. You found a water supply, and you got your wife to clear the bystanders out of our way. But now we have to -- "

"Now you have to do the right thing," I said, "because there's nobody else to do anything. Have you checked the foot-bridges?"

He said a coarse, derisive word. "They're wooden," he said. "What chance . . . for God's sake, man, get out of my way."

"For God's sake, man," I said, "remember that you didn't think it worth while looking at the Winshell brook."

That didn't reach him: Debating points don't register when you're in the glare of disaster, when you only have to turn your head to see it.

"There's the fire," he said. His voice, I noticed for the first time, was raw. He had been shouting. "We're going to put it out. Please let me get on with it, Mathers."

As he dropped the "Mr." for the first time, his self-control broke again and he added: "Out of my way, man, or by God I'll knock you senseless with my axe."

I stood back. Perhaps I should have fought with him, tried to depose him as overlord of the tiny, laughable army which was the only weapon with which the Great Fire of Shuteley could be fought, at the only time when it mattered, when something still might be done.

But what was the use? He knew something about fighting fires, and I, apart from fire risk, knew nothing. I had failed long before Sayell had a chance to fail. It was up to me, indirectly and yet significantly, to do all I could to see that something like this could never happen in Shuteley. A few years ago, a

few months ago, even a few hours ago, I could have saved hundreds of lives which had now ended . . .

My thoughts stopped there. In a disaster such as this, there comes a time when you have to count the cost, but it's only natural to delay it as long as possible.

In the back of my mind I had thought all along: I wasn't here. I don't know what happened. Maybe there was a small fire among the timbered houses on the green. Maybe people stood around watching it, until it spread and they had to move away. Maybe it was gradual, quick but steady, and every area was cleared as the fire took over. Maybe nobody died in the fire. If it was steady enough in growing, that could happen.

There must have been a lot of noise. People couldn't have missed what was happening watching TV, became quite early on the electricity must have gone and all the TVs must have gone off.

Dina would have been one of the first to know what was going on. She must have enjoyed it -- a magnificent bonfire, the greatest spectacle she had ever seen.

Dina, I suddenly realized with utter certainty, had escaped the disaster. Despite her feeble-mindedness (I used the brutal expression for almost the first time because at such a time the natural tendency was to print everything bold and clear) she had the kind of abilities, physical and mental, which would make her The Most Likely Person To Survive. She would enjoy a fire, untouched by tragedy, uninterested in its wider significance . . . but the moment the fire seemed to be getting out of hand, she would know, with animal cunning (after all, compared with any animal, even the most sagacious, she was a genius) that now was the time to go somewhere else. And she was supremely capable of doing it. She didn't smoke, didn't drink, didn't overeat or take drugs, and had never been ill in her life. Nobody in the whole of Shuteley could get from one place to another quicker than Dina once she had made up her mind.

Dina was alive and well (even if Miranda couldn't be trusted).

Sheila, I knew, was alive, well, and not even scorched.

Gil, Jota, Miranda -- the other people I cared about -- were probably all right too. Miranda would certainly be all right. She was with the giants. I hadn't had time to think much about the giants since I was driving back from the roadhouse, but I took it for granted that none of them had suffered in the slightest degree in the fire. It was our affair, not theirs. Somewhere, they were standing outside it, watching, enjoying the fun.

So, selfishly, I tried to put the disaster in proper perspective -- for me, it could have been a lot worse.

Yet Sayell was sending the first of his tenders across the river -- and that bothered me. To do the man justice, he leaped on it as it reached the bank at the selected place. Irrationally, like all good commanders, he wouldn't send his men where he wouldn't go himself.

The tender rushed down the incline. Still, the spot had been chosen carefully and sensibly. The vehicle stayed upright, it managed to slow (by gears, not brakes, I guessed) at the bottom and started the crossing.

There was irony and tragedy in what happened to it then. Comic tragedy, I guess, if a town had not been burning to death only a short distance away.

What looked like reasonably solid mud on the left side of the engine was merely earth mixed with water in misleading proportions, if you judged simply by the eye.

The tender keeled over on its side and commenced to sink in the mud.

Chapter Seven

Nobody was hurt, except in spirit. The firemen, mud-covered scarecrows, clambered back up the dry river bank. Sayell saw me and set a course that would take him as far as possible from where I was standing. I could do him a big favor by ceasing to exist.

The tender in the river bed, of some value just a few seconds earlier, was now so much junk. And the other tender could accomplish just half what had been possible a couple of minutes ago.

I knew how Sayell felt. In the face of disaster, continuing disaster, you had to do something. You had to try anything that might do some good. If it failed . . . well, you'd tried.

I left the group of firemen, knowing that if there was somewhere where I could be useful, it wasn't there. Sayell wouldn't listen to me. He was on a razor's edge. The fact that I had been right two or three times and he had been wrong would make it utterly impossible for me even to get him to listen to me again.

Sheila wouldn't need help with the children and old people over the hill. She was young and strong and didn't dither, and in emergency anyone old or young would be glad to obey such a leader. It was when people hadn't a leader, or only a quasi force-of-circumstance unconfident leader like Sayell, that everybody ran about like frightened hens.

I moved back the way I had come, along the river behind the huts. Since there was nothing particularly useful I could do this side of the river, I should get across to the other side. Although I couldn't cross where I was, and would die if I did, it would be necessary to go only a few hundred yards in either direction to be able to cross either the bed of the river or the river above the obstruction.

There might, I thought, be a chance of clearing the blockage which had

dammed the river. That would certainly help, if it could be done. A river running past a fire like this was better than a dry bed. At the very least, it was a firebreak.

I wasn't really thinking, merely reacting as a human animal. Most other animals would have put as much distance as possible between them and the fire, but as a human being I had to sniff round the conflagration and see if there was anything to be done.

Some events are numbing, like a blow on the head which doesn't put you out but leaves you staggering through pain and nausea and dizziness and momentary blackouts. This was one. If you stared at the fire . . . well, you couldn't do it for long, and there was really nothing to see but glare and smoke and flame and horror, if you let your mind analyze what you were seeing. But anyway, after you'd had a glance or two across the river, you realized that you couldn't afford to watch the fire.

It was hypnotic as well as terrifying. There was flame motion, smoke pattern, that caught you and held you like the one movement in an utterly still scene. Your eyes could water and smart, but a second would grow to a minute, ten minutes, and it would be an instant.

To retain the power of movement, the power of action, you stopped looking across the river.

I knew perfectly well that if I wanted to find people who had escaped from the blazing town, if I wanted to know how it happened, I should go the other way, downriver. Practically all the roads and lanes and other escape routes came out that way. Upriver on this side there was nothing but the track that led to my house and then curved away from the river to a few farms, and on the other, Castle Hill and a rubbish dump.

But the giants were upriver.

In retrospect it's strange that the giants and their part in what was going on could be practically ignored for so long.

Obviously, as I'd said to Sheila on that mad drive back to Shuteley, they were in this business up to their necks. At the least, they had known what was going to happen. At most, they were entirely responsible for it.

Yet if somebody starts a fire, a little fire that can destroy only a single house or a farm, if somebody standing beside you strikes the match and fires the hay, you don't go for him. Your first move, instinctive and correct, is to deal with the fire. Coldly, logically, it might be valid to go for the fire-raiser, to make sure he does no more damage.

But the fire-raiser might do no more damage anyway -- and the fire already exists.

The giants were still at the back of my mind, with what might well become known as the Great Fire of Shuteley taking all my attention.

Then, as I passed a gap through which the scene across the river could be glimpsed, I saw something that brought the giants right back into the picture.

It was one of those snapshot impressions you get as you pass the end of a lane, or a window, or a gap in a hedge. The brain takes the snapshot like a camera, the picture remaining often sharper and clearer than a scene you've viewed for ten minutes.

Between me and the dull embers of a building across the river which could burn no more, I had seen one of the giants -- over there. He was tall and blond, but he was not Greg. He wore what looked like a plastic coverall over a hump on his back. His eyes were hidden behind thick dark glasses.

The whole thing was so much like something in a horror film that I paused for a few seconds before going back, refusing to believe I had really seen him.

No one could live over there. No one could breathe. Certainly no one could walk in any kind of footwear I could imagine, because the ground was red-hot. And a plastic spacesuit would shrivel up instantly like a fertilizer bag

thrown into an open fire.

I jumped back after that moment of disbelief, but of course the giant, even if real, was past my narrow angle of view. I burst through to the riverside, and there was nobody to be seen.

Yet I had seen him. The clear picture in my mind had beaten back the disbelief. He was neither Greg nor any of the giants I had consciously looked at. The picture didn't fade. I could still see it. Shutting my eyes, I could even notice things I hadn't noticed before.

What had looked like a hump must be the breathing apparatus which made it possible to walk through fire. The giant had been hurrying, not quite running, carrying nothing in his hands, under his arms or on his shoulders. He had worn a transparent plastic covering, enclosing his head and all the rest of him. Under the covering he seemed to have nothing but the hump. He was either naked or nearly so. Colors of things seen in such a setting could be anything at all, since yellow-orange-crimson flame filled the sky.

And one thing more -- he had not meant to be seen. You only have to glimpse an incompetent amateur sneak-thief for a moment to realize he's up to something and doesn't want to be observed. There had been something similar in the way the giant was hurrying. Possibly an obstruction had forced him to skirt the river for a few yards, visible from the other side. Deeper in the blazing town, he could not have been seen. Flames and smoke, if nothing else, would have swallowed him from view.

Although he had been hurrying downriver, back the way I had come, I didn't change my mind and go that way. If he really existed, if his incredible fire-suit really worked, no doubt he could walk through the middle of the fire as easily as he could skirt the edges. The people downriver would not see him, if he didn't want to be seen.

I went on. If one of the giants was wandering alone through the blazing town, the rest of them might be doing the same.

Including Miranda. "I think I'll be seeing Dina," she had said. "We'll do

something . . . "

She had also said: "No, I shan't see you again, Val."

Maybe she was wrong.

When I saw the blockage it was clear that explosives were going to be needed before the river returned to its usual course.

Shuteley Castle had stood on Castle Hill, the one piece of high ground on the north side of the river, just above the Old Bridge. A ridge ran along the south side, but on the north, only at the eastern extremity of the town did the ground rise to any height. There the castle stood -- or had stood.

It had glowered across the town from a curious round mound which looked so artificial that historians argued about the possibility that Saxon serfs had piled Castle Hill high with nothing more than picks and shovels.

Anyway, the fire had spread round the bracken which fringed the hill. It seemed that the bracken itself had held up the hill, for when it was gone, the castle and most of Castle Hill had collapsed into the river, taking the Old Bridge with it.

Above the obstruction the river tumbled into a hole which had not been there before, making a small but quite impressive waterfall before dashing itself against the huge mound of rubble which was all that remained of the castle and the hill on which it had stood. The river tried to climb over the mound, which was ten feet too high, and then took the path of considerable, but least resistance and streamed off southwards in about a dozen rivulets through a gap in the south ridge.

Until then I had not worked out that I'd either have to cross this side of the obstruction or cross twice, first the diverted river and then the river itself.

I didn't like the look of the streams rushing behind the ridge. They were

shallow but very fast. It would be impossible to keep my feet if I tried to wade through, and when water flings you about you're liable to crack your head on a stone.

It would be hazardous to try to cross the river bed on the west side of the mound of rubble, because it was steep and very loose. And back the way I had come the heat across the river was too fierce. Only close to the blockage, where what remained of Castle Hill afforded some protection from the heat, and where there was nothing left to burn on the other side, crossing might be possible.

So I started picking my way across the obstruction itself.

After I'd gone about ten yards, climbing toward the top of the mound, I found I couldn't go back. Loose earth and stones were sliding down the slope under my feet, and the best I could do was slip two feet back and gain three. If I tried to go back, I stood an excellent chance of being buried alive.

I had a moment of sheer panic as I neared the peak of the mound and the rubble sliding beneath me threatened to sweep me off on the dry side of the blockage. I saw myself falling about fifty feet over rubble which would come with me, almost certainly burying me beyond any hope of rescue (if I happened to be alive when I reached the bottom) and far beyond any possibility of digging myself out.

I fought against the slide, running against it like a man on a treadmill over a precipice. The light was tricky and my sense of direction was not all it might have been. The glare of the fire cast long moving shadows, smoke stung my eyes, and on the other side of the mound the darkness was so intense that I couldn't even see the white water.

I overdid it.

One moment I was fighting clear of the drop into the dry bed. The next I was teetering over blackness, flicked by spray from the blocked river below. And all the time the rubble beneath me cascaded this way and that, now into the dry bed, now down the slope to the south bank, now into the foaming

river.

Suddenly there was nothing beneath my feet at all. Then I was in water. Then the whole world exploded.

I came to soaked, cold, shivering, with an aching head and the rush of water in my ears. For a moment I was blind.

Dazed and deafened, I nevertheless realized where I was. I was somewhere in the middle of the delta of streams rushing into the blackness of the south side of Shuteley. The water rushing past me was not more than a few inches deep.

It seemed to take a long time before I worked out what to do and where to go. The huge mound of debris in the river bed cut off all heat and so much light that I found it hard to recover any sense of direction. And after being toasted for so long I could have sworn the water all round me was only one degree above freezing point.

At last I realized that if I forced my way through streams flowing from left to right I must come to dry land. Then all I'd have to do was cross a normal river that didn't know what trouble it was going to run into farther on.

I got across the streams somehow -- and then couldn't find the river. I seemed to be in a kind of marsh with rivulets running in all directions. Only the glow of the fire, cut off by the pile of rubble which had stopped a river, enabled me to find my way back to the bank of a more or less normal Shute.

I made my way along the bank.

Dizzy and with a head which seemed to be cloven in two, I shied away from the very thought of attempting to swim across the river. I'd probably be swept down to the whirlpool which had already knocked me silly. The Shute had always been a placid river, and in this hot summer it had been more placid than ever. But any river becomes angry if it's balked and not allowed to follow the course it has taken for centuries.

Presently, stumbling upriver, I became aware that one of my discomforts had gone. I was still soaked, but I was no longer shivering. It was, as usual, a hot night.

My house ought to be visible in the reflected glow. Yet it wasn't. Ahead of me, nothing was visible.

This was very strange. By comparison with the glare behind me, I was walking into darkness. Nevertheless, the red glow, the heat of which I could still feel on the back of my neck and through my wet clothes, should have lit up the river ahead at least as far as my house.

And ahead there was nothing.

I sniffed, and not because I smelled something. Quite the reverse. There was a sudden startling absence of smell. I was puzzled as a sleeper awakening to silence is puzzled, before he realizes that a clock has stopped.

Voices upriver gave me a clue. I had moved into a region of odorless vapor which didn't sting the eyes, had no smell, and cut visibility. I moved on. The voices grew louder.

Then I stopped,

I had almost reached my house. It was invisible, but it could be no more than a hundred yards away. I had followed the river to the copse -- and there, just in front of me, was a bridge where there had never been a bridge. And there were people on it, crossing from the other side to the copse.

Not for the first time that night I acted without thought. I went closer, but along the bank, stealthily. I slipped silently into the water. Cautiously, carefully, I paddled under the bridge.

The people I had seen on the bridge were giants, in plastic suits with the hump I had already noticed, and baffled, bedraggled, frightened people who could only be refugees from the Great Fire of Shuteley.

The bridge was as startling in its way as luxon.

It was only a catwalk perhaps a foot wide with two rails three feet apart. There were no supports and no reinforcements of any kind. It lay across the river like a plank, but I felt it, pushed against it, and it was solid as a rock.

There was little or no risk that I'd be seen under the bridge. The smokescreen, or whatever it was, that the giants were using as cover cut visibility very effectively. It was not like fog or mist. You could see ten yards very distinctly, twenty to thirty yards vaguely, and beyond that was blackness. Sound, too, was muffled.

All the giants wore plastic suits and small, quite neat boots. Underneath they all wore as little as possible, and nevertheless seemed to be bathed in sweat.

The dark goggles their eyes would need in the center of a conflagration were folded down across their chests. Wearing them, out of the fire, they would be blind.

The others, the people who had come from Shuteley, wore a simpler sort of plastic suit, loose pants and tunics which, unlike those of the giants, were thrown open. Instead of the hump the giants had, they had merely a small black box apparently stuck to the inside of the plastic.

I thought suddenly of Jota and his part in all this. Had the giants recruited him, or was he lying drugged in one of the tents at the camp?

Miranda was not among those I saw.

Vague recollections of time stories I had read raced through my mind. Of course, I had never taken time travel seriously . . . it was the kind of thing which, if it ever happened, was never likely to impinge on me and affect my life.

One of the assumptions made in such stories suddenly assumed significance. You couldn't steal a man from the past, because of the effect his disappearance would have in his future, your past and present. But a man whose life was over, through accident -- a man about to be destroyed in an explosion, buried forever by an avalanche, engulfed in a mine disaster . . . such a man, on the point of ceasing to exist, could be plucked from his time without affecting subsequent events significantly.

Was that what the giants were doing?

I wanted to hear what was being said, and that posed a problem. In the river I was too near the flowing water to be able to make anything out, and if I crawled up the bank, the giants coming along the other side and crossing the bridge might see me.

So I drew back a little and swam across the river far enough downstream to be invisible from the bridge. As I neared the other side, the bank, though not high, hid me.

Then I crawled along the bank until I was under the north end of the bridge, still hidden by the bank, and pulled myself partly out of the water.

I heard: " Well, you'd be dead otherwise."

"But what are you going to do with us? Where are we going?"

" You'll be safe."

"This is the Mathers place. Where's Mr. Mathers?"

" In his house asleep."

"My wife . . . what about my wife? I haven't seen her since . . . "

" She'll be all right."

"I don't want to go. I want to go back and . . . "

The giants' voices were slightly muffled by their suits, but on the whole easier to make out than those of the frightened, anxious, shocked refugees. I could hear only snatches, of course, as people passed over my head.

"We'll never get back?"

" You'll be well looked after. Think of it this way -- you're going to heaven.
"

"Heaven?"

" To you it'll be heaven. Nobody with a choice would stay here."

"What do you want us for? Did you start the fire?"

" No, we didn't start the fire."

"Why did you take us past Castle Hill and the dump? There was nobody there -- "

" We didn't want to be seen. If it meant being seen, we couldn't help you. "

"My Moira . . . I saw her catch fire. I'll never forget her scream. She blazed like . . . "

" We saved you, didn't we?"

"Why couldn't you save Moira?"

" Others were looking. People who aren't here. We couldn't let them see us.
"

"If you can walk through the fire, why don't you . . . "

And then again: "This must be the Mathers place. Where the insurance manager lives. Is he in this somehow?"

" He couldn't be more out of it."

"You mean he's dead?"

" Just dead to the world."

The conversation went on, and I strained my ears to hear it, but the two who were talking were halfway across the bridge now and it was another snatch of talk I heard.

"What happened to the fire brigade? Why didn't they . . . "

A very common word on the lips of these poor bewildered survivors was "why." If they didn't ask why God had permitted such a disaster, they asked why they had escaped, why others hadn't escaped, why the strangers, if they could do so much, couldn't do even more, like putting out the fire.

From the giants' replies it was obvious that to them, as to Miranda before I managed to get through to her, the people of Shuteley were little more than characters in a play. The answers were quiet, soothing, apparently truthful as far as they went, which wasn't far.

"Where did you come from?"

" You'll see."

"You're the kids that I saw in town yesterday, aren't you?"

" Yes."

"If I thought you had anything to do with the fire. . . " A stream of invective followed, empty, hopeless obscenity, for the man who was speaking knew perfectly well he could do nothing but curse. He couldn't even fight the giants or resist them -- the giants, girls and boys, had spread themselves out among these refugees to prevent protest or rebellion.

I realized that there were a great many more of the giants than I had ever seen, far more than there could have been at the camp. I had not known of more than about a score of them. There must have been at least forty crossing the bridge, not counting any who might have crossed before I arrived on the scene.

I knew from the snatches of conversation I heard that the giants had been careful to be observed by no one who was going to live through the fire. They had led these people *through* the fire, in their simpler fire-suits (probably simpler so that they could be put on quickly and with no risk of mistake), and by a route chosen to avoid being seen. The crowds of people who must have escaped the fire would not gather about the north-east end of town at the rubbish dump, but at the other end, where the roads were, and the straggling cottages which must have escaped the fire, and the nearest farms. That could have been confidently predicted.

Presently the procession ended. There was a gap, and then three more figures appeared, two huge, one small. They were Greg, Wesley and Miranda.

Wesley reached the bridge, just above me, and spoke.

Oddly enough, it still surprised me, after all that had happened, that the giants' language, when they were speaking to each other and not to us, was not the English of the mid-20th century. It was English, and I could understand most of it by listening to the sense rather than the sound. But many of the words were not quite right, several of the vowels had changed, and since the speech was colloquial there were many phrases that were hard to figure out.

What Wesley said, roughly, was: "That's . . . (the lot?) now. We've left nothing but the stasis and the two . . . (?) in it. Who's going back?"

"I am," said Greg.

"We're both going back," said Miranda.

I couldn't see Wesley, but I sensed his uncertainty. "Okay," he said, after a pause. "I'll go on and tell them to . . . (?) everything but the stasis, is that right?"

"And the stasis just before dawn," said Miranda.

"Sure. You've got to be there then. If you're not -- "

Greg said a word which was entirely new to me, and yet the meaning couldn't have been more obvious. The politest translation would be "Go away."

Wesley went away, crossing the bridge and disappearing into the copse.

Moving slightly, I could see Greg and Miranda quite well, for they had stopped short of the bridge and were not looking at it. Keeping my eyes on them, I could duck out of sight at any moment before I could be seen, if they turned their heads.

They wore suits exactly like the others. The briefs they wore underneath seemed to be pink or gray. Seeing them both running with sweat, I wondered why they didn't take off their plastic suits or at least open them up. I also wondered why a technology capable of constructing flimsy suits which could withstand the highest temperatures couldn't go a step farther and make them comfortable as well.

Miranda said: "Let's go back, then."

And wait till dawn?"

"Yes."

Greg laughed. "So that you can keep your eye on me, darling. Waiting for a wrong move."

"The next wrong move," said Miranda steadily.

He laughed again. "You idiot," he said. "You're all idiots, you and the others behind this . . . (?). When you found you couldn't keep me out of it, you should have canceled it. You knew I'd kill it."

"We knew," said Miranda, and I heard the defeat in her voice. "But you might fail. Lots of things might have happened. Maybe they still will. Jota might have -- "

For the third time, irritatingly, Greg bellowed with laughter. It was the laughter of a vandal, a spoiled kid with an inflated idea of his own value in the world. It was the laughter of a bully.

"Jota," Greg said, "has a little talent. I have the Gift. Nevertheless, Jota may be as important as you think. I think he is. That's why I had to see that your plans for Jota didn't work out."

"Greg," said Miranda quietly, "listen to me for a minute. Please listen."

"Go ahead. There's plenty of time. I'll listen."

"You're not necessarily bad. You never had a chance. That sounds trite, and it is. You were not only bigger and . . . (?) and better-looking than anybody else, as far back as you can remember, but when girls began to interest you, you didn't have to bother to be nice to them or even go to the trouble of deceiving them. You had it all . . . You've often thought about how you're different from ordinary people, Greg. Have you ever thought about how ordinary people are different from you?"

This time Greg didn't laugh. He was interested enough to let her go on.

And as I waited, rather chilled by the water in which I was partly immersed. I felt for a stone or a stick.

Whether Miranda was on my side or not, I couldn't be on Greg's side. It couldn't be a mistake to take Greg if I could.

"People who haven't the Gift," Miranda said, "have to learn to coexist. When they're babies they know instinctively that they have to get and keep their parents on their side. As children they know that other children may sometimes be rivals, but they have to be allies too. So what you never learned was -- "

Greg bellowed again. "Is that all? I thought for a moment you had something to say. Now listen to me. First, take off that suit."

"I can't, I have to go back and -- "

"You're not going back, darling. Not to the stasis. Not across the bridge. Not anywhere."

I might have moved then, but with a silent suddenness which startled me so much I almost cried out, the bridge above me winked out.

It just wasn't there. It didn't burn or fade or shimmer or flash. It simply ceased to exist.

Although probably both Greg and Miranda noticed this out of the corner of their eyes, neither bothered to look -- which was just as well, because I might have been slow in ducking out of sight.

Miranda took a step back and turned as if to run. Greg reached out casually with his long arm and tumbled her to the ground.

Standing over her, he said: "But before I kill you, darling, I want to tell you that things couldn't have been arranged better if you'd let me plan them all myself. The stasis goes just before dawn, right? Just before dawn you've got to get those two out and get back in yourself, right? They're left alive, here, and you're safe back home, right?"

"Yes," said Miranda.

"There are two spare suits in the stasis so that you can get those two out,

right?"

"Yes."

"Wrong. They're gone."

Miranda sat up quickly. "I watched you all the time -- "

He laughed. "I know you did. So I got Wesley to shift them. He wasn't keen, but he didn't want to die. So he . . . (?) for me."

"He'll know . . . " Miranda began, and stopped.

"He won't know anything. He has no idea what the suits are for. But that's not all. Suppose I just kill you here and now, swim across and tell everybody you went back by yourself . . . "

I didn't fully understand all this, but from her startled gasp it was obvious that Miranda did. It was as if she had allowed herself to be locked in a dungeon of death, as part of a plan, and then felt in her pocket and discovered she didn't have the key.

Greg couldn't let it go -- he had to savor his cleverness to the full. "They'll believe me. They'll have to. You know that anything I say is the truth -- always has been the truth. All I've ever had to do is go into any . . . (?) office and make a statement. Whatever I say, it has to be the truth. Otherwise -- "

She leaped from under him and ran like a deer. Greg lunged after her. My hand forced, I scrambled up the bank and went after them. In my right hand I held a heavy stone.

They could both run much faster than I could. I'd have lost them in the strange mist that hid the bridge . . . but only a hundred yards away, it ceased to exist. And I came on Greg and Miranda, only six feet from the river, with Greg again standing over Miranda.

I let fly with my stone. It caught Greg full on the back of the head, and he staggered. His legs collapsed under him. He pitched right over Miranda and landed on the other side of her.

We could have escaped if we'd been quick enough. But Miranda stared up at me in surprise, astonished to see anyone at all, more astonished to see me. And I coughed as a cloud of smoke swirled round me -- out of the giants' protective mist, I had forgotten to be careful how I breathed.

Greg was up. He lashed out at my head, and although I escaped the full force of the blow, I went down heavily. The next second Greg had Miranda in his grasp. Holding her, he made a quick pass at me, and something stung my eyes.

I couldn't move. I could see and hear, I could move my eyes and, with an effort, my head. But that was all.

"What went wrong, Miranda?" Greg asked, looking down at me. "Why is he here?"

"I don't know. I left the . . . (?) in the house, below the bottom shelf in a cupboard. It was set slow-to-limit, short of death. Anybody in the house should have got sleepy very gradually, and then -- "

"So it didn't work. Or he went out too soon. It doesn't matter. Take off your suit, Miranda."

"No."

"Take it off. I'm going to take him into Shuteley, in your suit. Then I'll open it."

I didn't shudder, because I couldn't.

Picturing what was going to happen to me (walking through an inferno, unharmed, and then a wrench as the plastic suit was torn, then . . .) I must have missed something. A moment later Greg was saying:

"I want you, darling."

"Don't try to be funny."

"I'm very serious. There's nothing more important in the world to me. I want you, here and now."

Incredibly, Miranda, who had been standing up to him, opposing him, arguing with him, was as weak and pliable as if under hypnosis.

Well, was that it? Hypnosis?

"I thought . . . " she said, visibly struggling.

"You thought after that one time, when you resisted, and I let it go, that you could stand against me. That I didn't want you. That you still had some authority over me. That for some reason, any reason, I was never going to claim you."

He laughed. It was a forced laugh. There was no mirth in it. And I realized now that Greg's laugh was always forced, completely lacking in real enjoyment.

At once, as if he had never laughed, he went on fiercely, malevolently: "I set you up, darling. For when I wanted you. And the time is now."

There was a brief pause. Then, slowly, reluctantly Miranda touched her plastic suit at several points, at the throat, at her waist, at her knees. It split and fell off her, and the box at the back came with it. So did the boots, which were part of the suit. So did the dark goggles.

Like an automaton she stepped closer to Greg.

And he hit her.

I'd never seen such a blow. At the very least he was twice her weight. He hit

her as a very large man could have hit a rather small child, but perhaps never had in human history; surely even a human beast would find it impossible to hit someone so much smaller so hard.

Her feet left the ground. She would have been thrown several yards anyway. As it was, she sailed far out over the river, unconscious before she touched the water, and was swept away.

She was possibly dead before she landed. In the river, unconscious, she would drown.

Greg was satisfied. He scarcely glanced at the river. Instead, he bent to pick up her suit.

Straightening, he looked down at me. Greg must be used to looking down on people. Yet he still seemed to enjoy it immensely.

"I'm a little sorry for you, Val," he said, in ordinary English. "You didn't know what you were up against -- despite knowing Jota. Miranda knew. Wesley and all the others knew -- especially the girls, of course. You didn't, you poor fool. If you'd stayed quietly at home tonight, you'd at least have lived. Miranda left a sleep cylinder in the house to make quite sure, because of what we had to do here."

He shrugged. "You needn't worry -- I won't open your suit until we're right in the middle. You'll scarcely feel a thing. It'll be over in a second."

Chapter Eight

I don't think Greg hit me again.

I had been drinking at the roadhouse, not enough to show, but enough to know I'd been drinking. What had happened since would have made me stone cold sober if I'd had ten times as much, yet the residual alcohol in my system was one thing. The shock of what had happened was another. Then, the constant blast of heat from the blaze across the river must have done something to all of us, though since it was constant we soon ignored it. I had fallen into the river, hit my head and got water in my lungs. Greg had hit me and thrown a paralyzer of some kind at me.

It could have been all that which had suddenly caught up with me. In any case, the next I knew I was being led through the fire. Dazed, I hardly knew whether I was dreaming or not. Certainly only in dreams could I ever have experienced anything remotely like this before.

In spite of the goggles over my eyes, the flames were still blinding until the eyes adjusted. Greg, at my left side, grasped my arm tightly, half leading me, half carrying me. And we moved through a vast furnace.

The suits were totally efficient. They completely screened all heat, and the air I breathed was pure. No smoke stung my eyes or throat.

Yet it was an ordeal of terror.

There was nothing to be seen but living flame and smoke. Frequently the ground writhed with liquid fire -- blazing oil, tar or anything which liquified in extreme heat. The confidence I soon acquired in my suit and boots -- which fitted surprisingly well -- did very little to still terror of the unknown.

I was lucky, I suppose, that I was too dazed to think properly. I had that "this can't be real" feeling that makes people capable of things otherwise utterly beyond them.

It also prevented me from having to fight or at least resist Greg. He had just murdered Miranda and had every intention of murdering me at any moment in a particularly horrible way. I should have done something, though Greg

could kill me quite easily simply by abandoning me.

But the feeling that this wasn't really happening made it possible to play along with it. At the moment Greg was helping me.

The vagueness did not prevent me from remembering afterwards the horror of a fire that consumed not a building but a whole town.

I saw only some of what the fire had done, and I was glad of it.

One single impression summed it up.

The damage to property was nothing. Houses could be built again. Cars in the street had melted into red puddles. That was unimportant. But too often, no longer in the cars, because the cars no longer possessed any "in," there were relics of human beings, who had not, even in presumably efficient vehicles, been able to escape what was happening round them.

In a way it was all clean and antiseptic. Fires are clean. A fire like this was cleanest of all fires. There was no blood to be seen, no skin, no guts, nothing unpleasantly animal like that. The fire had taken care of all such things. There would be no plague after the Great Fire of Shuteley. The fire had been too efficient for that. Anything organic within the inner area had perished forever.

The crowning horror was the mound of blackened bones.

I wouldn't have seen it if it hadn't been in an area (where in the town I hadn't the slightest idea, for nothing was recognizable) which must have burned early and was therefore totally consumed. Around it the fire still raged, but here there was near blackness. Even the tar in the streets had been burned, and the stone merely glowed darkly.

And in the wreckage of a collapsed building was a vast mound of skeletons. There seemed to be thousands of them, but there were probably only hundreds.

For one wild moment I wondered if the giants had collected all the victims they could find and dumped them all together in one refuse heap of human remains. I almost hoped this was so. But it couldn't be. These were the victims of a single disastrous incident in the general horror. This was not the total toll, only a single part of it.

A large number of people must have been together somewhere in the town when the fire caught them. They must have died quite quickly, or the pile of bones would not have been so neat and compact.

Only the impression, the picture, registered at the time -- but it registered for life. It was something I'd never forget.

It was only then that I started to hate the giants. What kind of beings could have known this was going to happen, and not tried to avert it?

Awareness came back gradually, but rapidly, and it was to some extent retrospective.

I knew I had reached a haven of peace and coolness in the heart of the fire, which was still blazing all around me, but as if behind glass.

But what was I doing in a haven?

Greg had brought me through the fire: I knew that. He had meant to tear my fire-suit at a spot where the temperature was instantly lethal: I knew that too. Yet I had come through the fire, with Greg.

I became aware, with some surprise, that I wore only my underpants. The fire-suit I had been wearing had been removed. It lay on the ground beside me. I now understood why the giants wore little or nothing under the suits. The suits, light and not elaborate, could be effective only if they were utterly impervious to heat, a complete barrier to it. If they let any heat through at all, they'd be useless in such a fire.

It was beyond even the giants to construct a suit which would stop heat coming in and let body heat out. So you stewed in your own juice.

Greg was with me, he was talking to me, but the sense didn't register yet. Apparently realizing this, he stopped.

He had thrown a gas capsule at me, or something which had a similar effect. Apart from that moment when my eyes smarted, there were no painful effects. But although I could move, although my mind could register some things, it couldn't sort them out.

I glanced around.

We were in a huge hemisphere of no-fire, entirely surrounded by fire, in an area in the town which I couldn't place. It was flat, and the ground was plain, scorched earth, with few stones and no debris. In the center was a dome, a curious object. It was a plain hemisphere 15 feet high, as smooth as ice but of no material I knew. The faint silveriness suggested metal, the translucency glass, the milky opaqueness plastic. One thing was clear: since it stood in the exact center of the cleared space, and since the dome of no-fire was exactly the same shape, one followed from the other.

The air was cool and fresh, with no smell of burning. A faint breeze from the center of the stasis -- there was no doubt that this was the mysterious stasis I'd heard about -- confirmed that the machine there was air-conditioning the sanctuary.

Above the hemisphere, as well as around it, flames and smoke swirled up into the night sky. Indeed, there was no sky to be seen at any point. The flames were so fierce that they completely submerged the dome.

"The village green," Greg was saying. The effect of the capsule, or whatever it was, was wearing off. "Incidentally, there are a couple of people you know here -- "

"Why didn't you kill me?" I croaked. I wasn't grateful. You don't have to be grateful to a man for not killing you. Yet through the haze I was curious.

"You'll die anyway," he said. "Without this you'll die." He picked up the suit. "Without it you can't get out of here."

Yet he had suddenly become less certain, less confident.

And as I recovered further, I said: "I'm not down on fate's list, is that it? You couldn't kill me? It's not on the cards?"

"There isn't any such thing as fate's list," he retorted, not laughing any more. "If I decide you're to die, you're dead."

He no longer wanted to talk. He turned and walked to the edge of the stasis, not looking back. As I watched, he passed through the edge. The invisible wall flared, but seemed to offer him no resistance. I was perfectly prepared to believe, however, without experiment, that for me the stasis was a prison. Either there was some kind of wall which I couldn't get through (which seemed likely, since the air wasn't being sucked out by the oxygen-greedy flames), or I'd die, frizzled to a cinder, before I'd completed a single step out of the stasis.

I didn't immediately walk round to the other side of the machine. I was still coming to myself. Vivid as my recollection of the mountain of skeletons was, I wondered if it was part of a dream, and hoped it was.

The last thing to come right was my hearing. Stupidly I'd been wondering why, if there were two other people here, I couldn't hear them and they hadn't heard Greg and me talking. Were they bound and gagged? If so, why, when I wasn't?

Then I realized that though in the stasis there, was no blistering heat and no smoke, all the sounds of the fire came through, the crackling, hissing, boiling, crashing, popping, fizzing, sizzling, roaring . . .

Anyway, I knew who the other two were. They were Jota and Dina.

Yet although I knew, I hesitated a moment longer. Several times earlier I'd

had a rather theoretical thought that if Dina perished, my own life might be simpler and better. But that's the kind of thing you think only when you don't believe it can happen. When you know it can happen, when you know it's more than likely, you discover what you really want.

Dina had to be there. I was hesitating because I was afraid I was wrong, afraid the other two might be Gil and Barbara, or Barbara and Garry, or Jota and Gil, or some other two from the four.

I might have waited much longer. But as my hearing returned to normal, I heard Jota's voice over the medley of fire sounds. I moved closer, started to go round the stasis machine, and paused incredulously.

"Wake up, damn you," Jota was saying. "Wake up, little cousin. What use are you lying there; while we're stuck in the middle of all this? Wake up, you little darling, and become useful . . . "

He didn't say exactly this. He used all the available oaths, particularly the sexual ones.

I moved further round so that I could see what was going on. Dina was lying on her back, sound asleep, and Jota was kneeling beside her, his back to me.

He shook her, gently at first and then more insistently. He was saying: "There's nothing wrong with you, apart from the thing nobody is supposed to speak about. Wake up, then. Wake up and . . . "

His words then became shockingly obscene. The kind of mindless idiot from whom deliberate coarseness usually comes, who expresses the most earthy ideas in his earthy experience in the most earthy way, doesn't have the intelligence or imagination to make much of a job of it. Indeed, the more earthy he becomes, the less he would shock anybody except elderly spinsters, who never hear such effusions anyway.

But Jota was a master of obscenity.

I might have quite admired his performance in uncommitted wonder if I'd happened to be uncommitted. But the girl was Dina. The fact that Jota was her cousin didn't particularly bother me -- if the law allows cousins to marry, consanguinity ceases to be an issue in all such matters.

What did bother me was that Jota cared for absolutely nothing beyond the fact that he was here, and Dina was here, and she wouldn't wake up. He even made it perfectly plain, several times, that in the last resort he didn't care much whether she woke up or not.

That Dina was a child mentally was nothing to him. That there was something unnatural about her sleep was also nothing.

Jota was single-minded.

Why I waited, listening, watching, doing nothing, would have been hard to explain at the time, but not difficult to explain afterwards.

I hadn't forgotten the case of Jota and Sheila.

I had admired Jota, I had envied him, and always I'd been a little afraid of him. What it was about him that I feared I didn't know then, though I could have guessed that the knowledge that nobody had ever stood up to Jota and bested him had a lot to do with it.

If at the first moment when I knew that Jota was trying to seduce my feeble-minded sister I had gone round and shown myself, the incident might have fizzled out completely. Jota would have laughed, I would have cooperated with him in laughing the whole thing off, and that would have been that.

Why I waited was partly to give him enough rope to hang himself, mainly to let myself get so angry that Jota wouldn't be able to make me laugh the whole thing off as we'd done in Sheila's case (except Sheila herself).

Well, that's what it amounted to. I had thrashed Jota, but after that, instead

of just contemptuously kicking him out, I had made him promise to be a good boy . . . and if Sheila had been willing, we'd all have pretended to be friends again.

I remembered Dina coming down the stairs that afternoon, and wondered if it was at that moment that Jota decided the conquest of his fair cousin must be delayed no longer.

I got more and more angry.

I moved only when Jota lost his temper, started slapping Dina's face and punched her in the ribs.

"Jota," I said, "if you touch her again, I'll kill you."

He turned his head. And when I saw his face, I knew he was an animal.

Lust makes some of us cheat. But it turns only some of us into animals like Jota. I knew by his face at that moment that when he reached this state -- as he must have done many times -- he had ceased to be anything resembling a human being.

If he had to kill, that was all right.

If the woman died, now or later, that was unimportant.

If she was married, if her life and those of others were going to be altered irrevocably in the next few seconds -- well, what had that to do with Jota?

If she was a feeble-minded kid, his cousin, sleeping peacefully through disaster -- what right had she to sleep when he wanted her?

"Val," was all he said, but his thoughts and emotions showed in his face. At first he had no intention of being diverted. Then anger followed when he realized the difference my presence was bound to make. Then . . . fear?

The fist I planted in his face, rather inexpertly but with considerable force,

made up his mind for him. This was neither a love scene nor a conversation piece. It was a fight. He had no choice.

He made a further effort nevertheless. He jumped to his feet and backed away, saying: "Val, let's be reasonable about this -- "

I leaped on him and hit him on the mouth, which spurted blood. Jota ceased attempting to be reasonable and swung at me. I caught his arm and threw him, with no trouble at all.

There had been a wrestling bill at Shuteley one night when I was about fifteen, and someone gave me a ticket. I'd been fascinated, not by wrestling as an entertainment, but by the revelation that if you knew how you could throw people far heavier than yourself all over the place. So I found out about it.

I certainly never became an expert wrestler. As far as Jota was concerned, however, I might have been a world champion. I could throw him with very little effort, and he had no idea how to fall. Instead of rolling with the throw, he came down untidily with a crash each time, even on the fairly soft ground.

I threw him every time he got up, and never followed him down, because this wasn't a sporting contest that would be settled by a body press or a submission. I didn't want to hurt him, exactly; instinctively I was trying to beat him, to humble him, to teach him a lesson, so that he would never make a pass at Dina or Sheila again.

He kept backing, though he didn't actually run away, and to his credit he got up every time when he could. And he kept trying to talk to me. "Val, you and I shouldn't be . . . " "I wasn't going to . . . " "Will you listen to me . . . " and then, rather ludicrously: "I'm warning you, Val . . . "

We were close. to the edge of the stasis, and when I threw him again I simply didn't think about it at all. What the stasis was I had no idea. To me it was simply a wall. Greg had walked through it, but Greg was in a special suit.

When I threw Jota and he rolled towards the edge, I expected him to stop against it as he'd have done at any other wall.

But he didn't.

There was a sudden roar, and I was sucked toward the barrier myself as air rushed from the stasis into the inferno beyond. Despite the brightness of the flames, the sudden glare as Jota rolled through made everything else seem dull.

He had no time to scream.

Outside the stasis the flames were dying a little, but the temperature had not begun to drop. Out there, things that would burn didn't catch fire, they simply dissolved in the heat.

Five seconds after I threw him out of the stasis, Jota was not identifiable even as a cinder.

As Jota died, there was a gasp behind me, a feminine half-checked moan of horror. Horrified myself, I didn't turn at once. I assumed that Dina had wakened up.

It was only when, out of the corner of my eye, I saw Dina lying on the ground, peacefully, comfortably, breathing deeply and regularly, that I realized someone else had joined us.

I turned and saw Miranda.

I had not expected to see her again. It had seemed likely that she was dead. Even if she had survived what Greg had done to her, it was not in the cards that she'd be moving around any more that night; and then, lacking a suit, she couldn't get into the stasis through the blazing town.

But she did have a suit. And although she reeled a bit and her hair was over one eye, she was in better shape than could have been expected.

She got in first. "Didn't you know?" she whispered. "Val, didn't you know what would happen when he hit the stasis? Or did you *try* to kill him . . . murder him?"

I had certainly not tried to kill Jota, and I was shocked at the manner of his death and my responsibility for it. Yet Miranda's obvious horror at what she had seen filled me with incredulity, rallied me, and made me temporarily cease to wonder that she was here at all.

"Whatever I did," I said in sudden anger, "are you to be the judge? You, who knew exactly what was going to happen, and let it happen? You came here to watch a gala performance, to extract the last ounce of vicarious enjoyment out of the Great Fire of Shuteley. But was that all -- or did you *start* the fire?"

My outburst didn't bother her. In fact, she calmed down. "You didn't know," she said. "Anyway, what's remarkable is that you and Jota fought, and he died, and you didn't . . . Why did you fight?"

I said nothing, merely glanced down at Dina.

She was still sleeping like a baby. She looked so happy she must be happy, having wonderful dreams.

"What about Dina?" I said.

"She's been . . . treated. She may be different when she wakes up. That'll be in about three hours. I can't promise -- "

"And you left her," I said, "with Jota."

Miranda's eyes widened. "You don't mean he . . . So that was it. Don't say anything for a minute. Let me think."

"You seem remarkably concerned about Jota -- and remarkably unconcerned about the ten thousand people you allowed to burn to death."

"Not ten thousand. Not a thousand. We saved many who would have died -- you know that, don't you? Only we couldn't leave them here, we had to take them with us. We couldn't leave here, alive, anyone who should have died. Except Jota. Saving him, leaving him here alive, was one of the main purposes of the operation."

"It would have been easier to avert the fire."

She shook her head impatiently. "Could you eradicate the French Revolution? Could you negate the First World War, even if technically the means were in your grasp? No, the Shuteley fire had to happen. All we could do was make certain small changes -- saving Jota, for one."

"He died in the fire? Before you intervened?"

"Yes."

"Well, looks like fate had it in for him. But why should a little thing like being burned to a crisp prevent Jota from living to the age of ninety? You can loop him back. It's been done before."

"We'll have to try to do something like that," she said thoughtfully. "The question is, how? I don't have any apparatus. Greg won't let me return through the copse. I can't return from here until near dawn. When I do, it's pretty certain that -- "

"For God's sake, Miranda, tell me what's going on," I exclaimed. "From the beginning, you've been saying too much and not enough. Either you should have been a perfectly ordinary party of campers who knew nothing about anything, or you should have concealed nothing."

"Both Greg and I told you too much, Val," she said quietly. "But only you. Nothing that anyone else knows matters."

"Gil? Jota? Sheila? Dina?"

"Gil is with us and you'll never see him again. He's supposed to have died in the fire, with Barbara and Garry. They're all with us -- elsewhere. Jota, at the moment, isn't in the picture. Sheila knows nothing except at second hand, what you tell her. And Dina will know less. Or rather, the little bit that will remain with her will be so improbable that she won't tell anyone but you."

As she spoke, I realized that whatever the reasons, I really was the one person still breathing and still in Shuteley who knew anything important about Snow White and the giants. Nobody but me had paid any particular attention to them in The Copper Beech. Gil had noticed the peculiarity about the coins, but he'd kept it to himself and now it would be impossible to prove anything. The luxon suits had made people stare, but by this time everybody but me -- and Tommy -- must have decided they'd been seeing things.

Apart from that, Greg had talked only to me, and Miranda had talked only to me. If I were suddenly transported to Parliament or Scotland Yard or the FLAG head office, I couldn't hope to convince the people there that the giants were anything but a party of kids in a summer camp. Of course there would be oddities to excite curiosity, even official curiosity. None of the campers would ever be traced -- they'd disappear, with their camp, into thin air. Other witnesses would confirm the giants' abnormal proportions. And surely I couldn't be the only person to glimpse a giant in a fire suit? But these would be only enigmas. There would be enough to make it appear there must be something in my story. Not enough to prove any significant part of it.

"Yes, I see," I said. "But why me? Because I'm not going to be around, is that it?"

"That's not the reason," she said, "though just now I can't see how you and Dina can survive. One of you, yes. There's one suit. Not both, any way I can figure . . . "

We had time to work out something about that. It was still a long time to dawn.

"Why me?" I insisted.

We had been standing talking, Miranda still in her suit, the goggles at her neck, the hood over her head. Now she started to take it off, turning away.

But almost at once she turned back. She had made up her mind.

"Val," she said, "remember the first time I saw you? I knew you. I'd seen photographs of you. And I was careless enough to show it. After that, I spoke to you. So did Greg. We both wanted to meet you, to make up our minds about you."

"So I'm famous?" I said. "Important?"

"Not important, Val. Not famous. Infamous. You're the villain of the Shuteley fire."

The calm, factual statement shook me. I must have gone white. "I -- I started it?"

"No, no, not that. History didn't need that to make you the villain. The scapegoat, if you like. After this there's going to be a new word in the language -- mather. Not a capital Mather -- you don't talk of a capital Boycott either. Just mather -- meaning a catastrophe following the most incredible incompetence."

"Me?" I said stupidly.

"Oh, it isn't fair, of course. I know that. But history often isn't fair. An inhuman monster becomes a national hero. A clever man who made one wrong decision goes down as a jackass, a blunderer. A fool who did one right thing by mistake is held up for all time as the personification of

wisdom. You . . . "

"Well, what did I do?"

"Nothing," she said gently. "I said it isn't fair. You'll be blamed for what you did do, what you didn't do, and history will accept wild accusations as truth. You'll even be confused with old Amos What's-his-name, who died long before you were born, and blamed for what he did. He started a fire or two, you know. The general impression of Val Mathers is going to be that he was completely heartless and unscrupulous, and stupid as well. He bribed and lied his way to control of all insurance in Shuteley and then he set fire to the town -- "

"But this is absolutely impossible!" I exclaimed. "History can't -- "

"Well, there I misled you. Real history, the history of the historians, will get things much straighter. Real history is fairer to Captain Bligh, too, than the legend. The historians know you're not old Amos and didn't start the fire and lots of other facts like that. It's a fact, too, that it would hardly be to your advantage to be head of insurance and then start the fire. But it's not facts that go into legend."

She smiled slightly. "You may, now that I've warned you, be able to do something to protect yourself. That's if you do get out . . . "

"I most certainly will," I said warmly. "If what you say is true, there must be some villain in the piece, and if it's not me -- "

"Oh, there you're wrong again, Val. It is you."

"I thought you said -- "

She sighed and said: "We're in the same boat, you and I. You're going to be a scapegoat, and so am I. You're partly to blame, and I'm partly to blame. You for the fire, I for the failure of my mission here . . . Wait till I get this suit off, and I'll tell you the whole story."

She took off her fire-suit with obvious relief. It was cool in the stasis, but until she took off the suit she was insulated from coolness as well as heat. There were beads of moisture on her smooth midriff and her bare abdomen glittered with droplets.

A large multicolored bruise under her right breast showed where Greg had hit her -- carelessly, mistakenly, for there was scarcely any other part of her body where such a blow would have done less damage.

I wanted to ask what had happened to her and where she got the suit, but I refrained. I'd hear in due course.

She was going to tell me about herself and the giants and Jota and the fire.

She told me.

Chapter Nine

The fire started in the stack room of the public library over an hour after the library was closed and shuttered for the night. This was (would be?) established later from evidence pieced together too late to be of more than academic interest. Presumably an assistant who wasn't supposed to be smoking at all had thrown down the butt. It was going to be assumed that this assistant was one Maggie Hobson, an elderly library assistant who smoked furtively and incessantly, and it was a convenient assumption -- because Maggie Hobson, who lived alone in a single room near the library, did not survive the fire.

The stack room, with just enough ventilation to act as an efficient furnace,

generated such heat that when at last the fire burst its prison, it was an explosion of flame. The whole library was soon an inferno.

The fire grew gross in secret by one of the many quirks of chance that enabled the Shuteley fire to become what it did. Most public libraries are in the town's main street; they have huge uncurtained windows and a fire inside would be spotted as soon as books started to blaze.

But this library, though in the center of town, was just off High Street and presented a blank Victorian-quasi-Greek pillared facade to the world. The interior lighting was by skylights facing the other way.

And the warehouse next door, with the court behind, was in process of changing hands. It was blank, shuttered, empty. There was little in the warehouse to help the fire -- and nothing to hinder it.

So fingers of flame sped covertly through the warehouse to the timbered houses beyond, through the silent court to the rear of the shops in High Street, through a church hall to a tire store.

There were automatic fire alarms in the library, connected to the fire station and set to go off at a certain temperature. Something went wrong; the connection was broken without setting off the alarm. Even fire alarms are not always wholly fireproof.

Never before had a fire in the middle of an inhabited town, and not even a sleeping town, for all this was around 9:30, gained such a hold unknown to anybody. At other times and places something would have been seen -- but this blaze, grew behind blank stone and shuttered doors.

Of course it wasn't long anyway before the secret was out -- but by that time the library, the tire store, six shops, four or five houses, the inner court, the church hall, the warehouse and a filling station announced the news simultaneously with leaping, roaring flame almost beyond hope of control.

If there had been firemen on the spot within five minutes, they wouldn't have known where to start.

But that was another of the-laughable tricks fate played that night . . . At 9:35, a matter of minutes before Shuteley knew it had a fire of its own, the fire units were dashing to a farm blaze three miles south of the town. Not all of them -- not for another couple of minutes. Then a barn blaze was reported, also south of the town, and Shuteley was denuded of all official fire-fighting potential.

The irony was that the last tender crossed the New Bridge seconds *after* the discovery of the Shuteley fire . . . and it left from the fire station across the road from the library.

Mere seconds after the first shouts of "Fire! Fire!" the blaze had swallowed the town's telephone exchange and the fire station radio.

So far there was not a single human casualty. And perhaps, if everybody had stayed calm and collected, there might not have been any. Well, perhaps a few people in the nearest houses, those which were pretty comprehensively on fire before the first alarm, must inevitably have been trapped. But others, some distance and several minutes from the heart of the blaze, should have lived, and didn't . . .

Wood smoke swept the streets. People coughed and ran. A few brave souls went the wrong way, trying to save wives, children, parents who might or might not have already escaped. Heat struck them down, for this was the hottest of fires. It wasn't a creeping, insidious fire. It was a roaring, searing, all-engulfing tiger of a fire. A man took three steps towards it and never had a chance to retrace them. Heat lashed him, blinded him, struck him down and boiled him.

Most people had the sense to go the right way. And they lived. Fierce as it was, this fire couldn't race like a prairie fire. It had to leap from house to house, taking hold -- taking hold, true, in about a quarter of the usual time, yet still needing time.

And the people in the streets could outrun it with no trouble at all. They could even give the alarm as they went, if it didn't take too long . . .

Children died because they were too slow. Most of the younger children were asleep, which put them at a big initial disadvantage. They were difficult to rouse; blazing towns were outwith their experience; they were inclined to waste time over such luxuries as screaming for parents, putting on clothes, going in search of favorite toys.

Old people died because they wouldn't go without savings, mementos, insurance policies, pension books, framed photographs -- and often because they wouldn't leave without locking the front door. If they'd forgotten the keys, they'd go back for them.

Others died because they couldn't believe it. Fires in towns are put out. You watch them as you watch workmen excavating. It's safe across the road. Other people are nearer than you are. These people couldn't believe that this was something different, something that was going to go down in the history books. They had the chance to run for their lives, and they didn't take it.

They thought other chances would come, and they didn't.

The fire waited for nobody. Given such a splendid start, it spread out rapidly in all directions, reaching the river very quickly, because High Street was only about a hundred yards from the river.

Hardly anybody, as it happened, fled across any of the bridges. They were forced east or west by the fire's dash to the river, or, if they had a chance, north. And the fire, reaching the river, proceeded to spread all the way along it.

That the firemen weren't even there was an irony, after the first few minutes, rather than a significant factor. They might certainly have helped in giving the warning and in the withdrawal from the town. They could not have done anything that mattered in putting the fire out.

Every man, woman and child who looked into the yellow maw of the blaze and decided at once to get the hell out of this lived to tell the tale. Those who died were the people who for one reason or another never had a chance; those who made up their minds, erroneously, that there was no desperate rush; the heroes and heroines; and those who thought that there might be an opportunity of making something out of the disaster. It was a grim night for looters, who gambled on having time that they didn't get.

In addition, there was Trinity Hall.

I should have known at once when I came on the mounds of skeletons that this must be the site of Trinity Hall. Shuteley had various other halls, but only one with two upstairs assembly rooms where hundreds of people could gather.

On the first of the upper floors a pensioners' party was being held. Above, a school dance was in full swing.

The stairway, though narrow and wooden, was adequate. The trouble was, by mutual agreement the old and the young people had shut themselves off from each other. Neither wanted to have anything to do with the other. Everyone who was coming was present, and both halls were firmly barred to gatecrashers or others who weren't wanted.

The fire raced past the hall on two sides and closed in. Nobody escaped -- the whole thing was too quick. The fire-escape, ancient as it was, was sound enough. But if anyone ever got to it (and perhaps nobody did), it would have offered a grim, hopeless choice -- the fire inside, the fire outside, the fire all around, the fire beyond the fire.

Because of the noise in both halls and those two barred, Keep Out doors, in the few vital minutes when escape would have been possible, nobody knew there was anything to escape from. People running before the fire in the streets outside were shouting, screaming, banging on doors -- but not bursting in, dashing upstairs and battering on inside doors.

Brave, foolhardy people elsewhere took heroic chances to spread the

alarm. But no one happened to think of Trinity Hall . . . no one who was in the right place at the right time to do anything about it.

The fire cut the telephones almost at once, but the electricity failed in only a few places early on. Perhaps it was a blessing that lights stayed on; their failure would have added to the panic of old and young people.

Yet if the lights had gone out when all phones ceased to operate, people who got no warning until it was too late would have been alerted. At the least, television and radio would have gone off.

In Trinity Hall, in particular, the sudden failure of all lights would have brought both parties to a sudden halt. But the lights stayed on.

So 61 pensioners and 139 boys and girls between thirteen and nineteen died in Trinity Hall. Exactly two hundred. *And that grisly piece of the disaster more than anything else, Miranda told me, was the thing which was going to make my name stink forever.*

I didn't attempt to interrupt as she told me what she knew, which was less than I'd have expected. The giants didn't really know everything; their remarkable knowledge which had so impressed me on several occasions was merely a small collection of isolated bits of exact information. Miranda, who knew so much about me, hadn't known of the existence of Dina. Perhaps, in the world in which the giants played no part, Dina became worse, had to go into a home, and was not mentioned in any accounts that survived.

Miranda did not, after all, have to do much explaining to show me how I could become the villain of the Shuteley fire. As she spoke, I could see this for myself. And I felt cold horror at the partial justice of it.

I wasn't really a villain. I had done nothing stupid, immoral or illegal. And yet . . .

FLAG was to all intents and purposes the only insurance company in Shuteley. Practically all pressure exerted on traders, farmers, firms, factories and ordinary householders to make fire less likely was exerted by FLAG -- by me. I didn't personally inspect anything, of course. But I was responsible. If there was blame, it was laid at my door.

And there was going to be blame. After such a catastrophe, millions of people all over the world were going to feel that such a thing couldn't happen unless someone had been criminally irresponsible.

There were fire prevention officers, too, but not one based in Shuteley. Anyway, Shuteley didn't have a bad fire record. Advice on fire prevention and official pressure for better standards usually followed incidents which showed the need for them.

We were the people most responsible for fire prevention. And we were slack . . .

FLAG head office was pleased with Shuteley. The directors liked having a town in their pocket, insurance-wise. As local manager, I was expected to carry on the good work. Shuteley made more money for the firm than any other town four times its size, simply because of the volume of business. And the claims record was highly satisfactory. The office ran smoothly. But after all, the directors liked Shuteley first and foremost because it was the one place where the company was supreme. Shuteley made them feel good. It was unique.

There was no actual directive, but I was well aware that I must not lose business, must not allow any other insurance company a toehold. This meant that I wasn't supposed to be too hard to please. It would never do if we wouldn't insure a property and some other company would; if we insisted on certain fire safeguards and the other company waived them; if we set a higher premium than the other company.

So, while our methods in Shuteley were not exactly bent, they had always been yielding. No doubt some of the town's smarter business men knew our position and cunningly took advantage of it. We wanted to insure them, and

prestige mattered even more than profit. We could easily be maneuvered into giving a better deal than anyone else. We could also be persuaded to be satisfied with lower standards of safety than anyone else.

No, I hadn't been careless, I hadn't been crooked. I had merely been more easily satisfied than any insurance manager anywhere else would have been, with full backing from my firm.

But my firm's backing was going to fade away after this, after the staggering claims that would be made. FLAG would have to pay, in effect, the cost of the town, plus the insured value of the lives lost. Although the bill wouldn't kill the firm, it would make it very sick indeed. And instead of being the blue-eyed boy who kept a whole town in the company's pocket, I'd be the crass idiot whose incompetent methods were partly or even wholly responsible for the biggest pay-out ever made by any single insurance company in the world.

Also the firm's backing would fade away the moment there was a hint of public concern about the branch's methods.

Naturally the firm had known what I was doing, and approved. But that was before the Great Fire of Shuteley.

Oh, I could see it all. People like to have someone to blame. And I was just sufficiently involved to be a perfect choice.

"The most unfair bit," Miranda said quietly, "is the way Trinity Hall will be blamed on you. A fire officer called Christie inspected it a year ago and reported . . ."

I groaned. I hadn't exactly forgotten the incident, I had merely failed to fit it in place. I knew what was coming. "You saw Christie and showed him your own inspector's report on Trinity Hall. This said that although the building wasn't up to the highest fire-prevention standards, and had a big proportion of wood in the structure, and old wood at that, although the situation left a great deal to be desired, all fire-safety conditions were fully met -- "

"That's enough," I said. It was more than that: it was too much.

I wanted to hear about other things, no longer that.

"What happened to you?" I asked.

"Greg hit hard," she said, "but not hard enough. I'm small, yet I'm pretty tough. I came to in the river, choking, and let it carry me almost to the blockage. Then I swam ashore. I had a suit hidden in some bushes as a safeguard -- it wasn't entirely a surprise to me, what Greg did."

"What I can't understand," I began, and stopped. I'd been going to say I couldn't understand why Greg was allowed to sabotage everything that the others were trying to do, whatever that was, why Miranda and the rest of the giants had ever thought for a moment it was worth going ahead with their scheme while Greg was along with them, wrecking every move they made, and in the end trying to kill Miranda and failing only because in his vicious anger he preferred to lash out rather than make quite sure of her.

But that was only one of the things I couldn't understand. The others rose up and silenced me, tongue-tying me because I couldn't make up my mind which to press first.

Miranda, not surprisingly, was no longer immaculate. The two minute pink garments she wore were merely utilitarian, totally dissimilar from the subtle, carefully designed bikini she had worn that afternoon. It was probable that she and the giants had worn the briefs under their suits simply to avoid startling too much the Shuteley people who were to see them.

She was scratched and bruised, apart from the huge discoloration where Greg had hit her. And seeing her as she was then reminded me of the impossible glossiness of all the giants.

"You do come from the future," I said.

"What you call the future," she agreed. "What we know is the present."

"That's a play on words."

"No. Time doesn't happen all at once. The moving finger writes, and having writ, moves on . . . The date is 2097."

"Your date."

"No. *The* date. At this moment, it's April 17, 2097 -- a Wednesday, if you care to check. What comes after April 17, 2097, is the future, completely inaccessible. Before 2097 is the partly accessible past."

Her certainty irritated me. "This is what makes all you people cruel, inhuman -- the delusion that your own period is the only one that matters."

She was as certain as the torturers of the Inquisition. "It's April 17, 2097."

"Then I was born to no real existence? I live out my life in the shadows, dead from the moment I was born?"

That made her pause for a moment. "The metaphysical problems," she said at last, "are far beyond me. Perhaps you lived out your life in the second half of the twentieth century . . . perhaps you're restored to play it out again at the end of the twenty-first. I can't tell you the truth from your angle. All I know is that the pointer of time stands at 2097 . . ."

When I tried to argue, she went on: "Val, just think. I was born in 2067, and I'm here. Time *must* have reached . . ."

So she was thirty. It was surprising, in a way disappointing. She could have been eighteen or eighty, from what I had known, guessed and imagined. Thirty seemed an indeterminate age for Miranda. It seemed an anticlimax.

She went on trying to convince me that time had always reached a definite point, just as a clock had to register something, even if it had stopped. The date, the vital date, the only date that had any life or meaning, was April 17,

2097. Anything before that was the past, anything in front of it was the future.

Presently she realized she was wasting her time trying to convince me, and abandoned the attempt.

"It doesn't matter," she sighed, sitting down and leaning back against the stasis machine. "You want to know, but you don't want to know. You think you want the truth. All you want, of course, is what you want to hear."

"I do want the truth," I retorted. "What is it? You're a history class? At a college?"

Her eyes widened. "That's near enough true," she admitted. "I'm the teacher. The rest are pupils. But we're more than just a class. There are changes to be made."

"Changes? You're committing suicide, then? Change the past -- your past, if you insist -- and you change everything."

"No," she said patiently. "Time can't be changed, though bits of it can. Think of time as a river. It's an old idea, the river of time. But the analogy can be taken a good deal farther. Time is a river. And it's April 17, 2097 -- remember that, assume that, as a hypothesis, even if you're not convinced. Suppose we of 2097 interfere in the past, what happens?"

"You cease to exist," I said. "You wink out as if you never were."

"No," she said. "Remember the past is a river. Block a river, and what happens? Except in one case in a million, just what happened here. The river flows to the sea. Block it, and it takes another course. It still flows to the sea -- can you even imagine anything else? And except in the most unusual circumstances, the contour of the land forces the river to return to its original course rather quickly, and flow on as if it had never left it. Just think -- the very fact that a river exists means that gravity is forcing all the surplus water in the area to collect and flow in a certain direction. Stop the flow, and the water makes a detour, and then returns to the original

direction, the original bed."

What she said made sense, but only in a limited way. Arguing by analogy proved nothing. She was saying, in effect, that because a river would act in a certain way, time must act in the same way.

I said so.

She agreed. "It doesn't always happen. A river flows one side of a hill. Divert it even a few yards at a certain point, and it must flow the other side of the hill. And then it's possible that it never gets back to the original course. Well, that *can* happen in time, too, but even more rarely than it does with a river. Make minor changes in the past, and your own time is certainly affected . . . but not in a catastrophic way. The river makes a detour, and returns to its original course."

She paused and then said quietly: "I ought to know, because I've done it more than once."

"You've done it? Changed the past?"

She stood up and began to walk about. The flames were dying, I saw, for the firelight flickering on her skin, making it yellow and orange and red but mainly a deep bronze, was far less bright than it had been when Jota and I fought.

"About twenty-five years ago it was discovered that it was possible to alter the past, for a purpose, without making vast, indiscriminate chaos of time. At this moment, all the force and life of time is in Wednesday, April 17, 2097. Any time diversion made anywhere has its effect, perhaps a vast effect on 2097, but in the changed world I still exist, I'm still a teacher, I still do the same things at the same time.

"The paradoxes of time travel have always fascinated some people, but I'd never been one of them. I had assumed, as most people did, that if you somehow managed to change even the tiniest event in the past, the consequences which must result would multiply, square and cube

themselves with every passing millisecond, producing even in a few years a totally different world.

"If a girl were delayed ten seconds and consequently never met the man she would have married, never had the children, grandchildren, great-grandchildren she would have had, naturally the future must be quite different. Yet far tinier changes must, I had believed and still believed, be just as significant."

"What sort of changes have you made?" I demanded. "And how do you know you've made them?"

She smiled and sat down again. But she was very restless. Something was bothering her, something that to her was far more important than the Great Fire of Shuteley -- which, after all, was only history.

"Anyone who moves in time," she said, "remembers everything. You were in a loop, so you know what happens. You experience and remember the entire loop -- the previous track, what happened, the return, the change in events, the consequence."

Jota and I had entered the camp, fought, Jota had been killed and I had killed. Then we'd been pushed back a few minutes and lived through a different version of the incident. And we remembered everything.

Miranda went on: "What have we changed? Sorry, Val, I can't tell you. It's better not -- they're all in *your* future. This is the farthest-back point where a change has been sanctioned -- "

"So it's sanctioned, is it?" I demanded. "Your parliament or senate or whatever you've got calmly decides to monkey with -- "

"Wait, please." She laid her hand on my arm. "Cool down. You know nearly enough now for me to tell you plainly and simply why we're here, what we intended to do, and how the operation is going."

She was, however, in no hurry to start. And now that it had come to the

point, I felt no urge to hurry her.

We all like a safe, ordered world. Me more than most. The idea of people watching you, interfering with you, manipulating you makes the flesh creep. And yet, in this case, this very special case, if the giants had come to do the obvious thing and did it, if even now they could be persuaded to do it, I for one would have been delighted they came. Though afterwards, I wouldn't want any such interference again.

"We're here to save two people," she said. "One is Garry Carswell . . . not that he died in the original fire. If he had, we wouldn't have known his importance -- he wouldn't have had any importance. What did happen was that he lived, horribly scarred and mutilated, with the mind of a genius, but a traumatic genius who never really escaped the Fire of Shuteley. We believe that by saving him, which we've done -- letting him die might have been another way -- we can avert . . . "

She stopped. "No, I won't tell you about our time, your future," she said. "Nobody should ever want to know that, for certain. It's enough to say that our world may be a better place if Garry Carswell never grows up to be a brilliant diabolist. We've also saved his parents, Gil and Barbara, to live in our world. They died in the original fire, and that fact didn't help Garry . . . You won't see any of them again."

This didn't bother me: most people who had the choice of living in 2097 or dying in 1966 would find the choice easy. Many would even be glad to make the change.

"And the other you came to save was Jota," I said. "Well, that shouldn't cause you any trouble. Make one of your loops, as you call them, and give him a third life, or a fourth or fifth, or whatever it is. I've lost count."

"That might be possible, but for Greg."

"Yes, it all comes back to Greg, doesn't it?"

She shivered, probably partly at the thought of Greg and what he had done

and what he still might do, and partly because it was rather cool and airy in the stasis, in comparison with the various kinds and degrees of heat we had all been experiencing. Jumping up, she pulled at her two-piece and with no trouble at all the scraps of material became a leotard, knitting at her waist with no apparent join. It was only a trivial miracle, hardly worth mentioning.

"The loops," she said, "are legal. They're allowed. Only minimal apparatus is required, and the effect is extremely local. A few people are affected; the rest of the world is quite unaffected."

"Legal?" I said. "Allowed?"

"The moment time-molding became possible, there was immediate, irresistible public pressure for loops."

Sitting down again, she snuggled close to me, quite impersonally, merely for warmth. I had been nothing, then a lover; now I was a friend, if that.

"Think how the very possibility of loops instantly transfigures the world. Most accidents can be averted up to five seconds before they happen. A precious vase is dropped . . . turn back the clock, undrop the vase, and it lasts another thousand years. More important . . . a driver is careless for a fraction of a second, and a car plunges into a river. Regain the last five seconds, and drowned people are undrowned -- "

"As Jota and Wesley were unkilld," I murmured.

"Exactly. The permitted technique works only over a short period, a few minutes at most, and a tiny area. But it's saved thousands of lives, a lot of valuable property and prevented many disasters. Now, you want to know about Greg -- "

"Yes, Greg," I said. "Tell me about Greg. Explain the inexplicable."

"Why he's here? Well, he's got the Gift."

"The gift?"

"He's a witchdoctor. Only *his* magic works."

The introduction of further gobbledegook irritated me. I was just beginning to figure out how this business made sense. And then she introduced something fantastic which could never make sense.

Before I could speak, she said sharply: "Don't say it. Val, you haven't been very bright. You could tell me far more about the Gift than I can tell you. You know all about it. Or you would, if you'd ever opened your eyes."

I could think of only one explanation. "I've got it?" I exclaimed.

"No, not you -- Jota."

Step by step she made me remember, and interpret. And I lived through years of my life with her, prompted by her.

Chapter Ten

Although Jota was my cousin, I didn't know him until he was three. His mother was my father's sister, but they had never been close and the two people they married disliked each other.

When the Mulliners came to live next door to us, I was three too. Family feeling had nothing to do with the move. The house was available and convenient, that was all.

I never knew Mrs. Mulliner as Aunt Jean. There was no contact between the two families, but Jota and I, being only children of the same age, almost inevitably played together.

We used to be put out together in one back garden or the other, and allowed to run wild in ours (because neither my father nor my mother had any interest in gardens, and ours was a jungle), but had to be very careful in Jota's, because Jota's father was an amateur horticulturalist. He called himself that, and even at three Jota and I were trying to say the word, without much success, and with no idea what it meant except that because Jota's father was a horticulturalist we had much more fun in my garden.

(Miranda led me through memory quite fairly, not explaining although she did direct. She reminded me of very little, and never forced her sometimes more accurate information on me. All she did, really, was direct my attention to facts which I had never considered particularly significant, because if I had, I'd have had to believe the unbelievable. The unbelievable *then* . Anyway, sometimes, quite often, indeed, my memory contained important things of which she knew nothing whatever.)

We must have been about four and nearly ready to go to school when we had contact for the first time with the nastiness of the outside world. What happened in my own house I naturally took for granted, and anyway it was never nasty, merely baffling at times. I loved my mother and depended on her like any child, and ninety-five percent of the time she was like anybody else's mother. It was only occasionally that the world turned upside-down, that there was screaming and rushing about and slammed doors and sobbing, and I knew then to keep quiet and pretend not to exist.

The garden behind ours belonged to Mr. Sylvester, who was a fat red-faced man whom I used to like quite well. He used to give us aniseed bails, always throwing them and laughing all over his fat body when we failed to catch them, as we always did.

Later, however, Mr. Sylvester changed. Jota (who was Clarence then -- the name didn't seem strange to either of us until we went to school) and I didn't understand why he had changed. Until Miranda made me think about

it, I didn't realize that he was simply a gardener jealous of Jota's father's achievements. He didn't throw aniseed balls to us any more. Over the fence, he asked at times why we didn't run about in Jota's garden the way we did in mine.

Then he started complaining about our garden, saying the weeds were coming through the fence. To Jota and me this was manifest nonsense, because we had never seen a plant walk.

Anyway, there was constant trouble between Mr. Sylvester and Jota's father, and between Mr. Sylvester and my father, and even between my father and Jota's father, because Jota's father said weeds *did* go through fences and it was time my father did something about the jungle.

Jota and I never understood the situation, but what we did know was that we could never play in either garden any more without being shouted at by Jota's father or my father or Mr. Sylvester. And we both managed to work out, without the slightest trouble, that the whole thing was Mr. Sylvester's fault.

Really, it was quite a crisis in the life of a couple of four-year-olds. We were not allowed to wander about the town, to play in the streets, to disappear for hours. In the back gardens, until Mr. Sylvester spoiled everything, we'd spent whole days of childish delight every time it didn't rain. We *needed* our sanctuary, because although I didn't think about it at the time, Jota's home too, where there was a perpetual tug-of-war for power, was also a place he was instinctively glad to escape from, and nobody had ever bothered us in my garden at least until Mr. Sylvester started making a nuisance of himself.

One day Mr. Sylvester ceased bothering us. He was dead. Neither Jota nor I had any clear idea what that meant, except that we were free again to play in my garden as we liked, and in Jota's garden with circumspection. We were honestly delighted that Mr. Sylvester was gone, and there was no shadow on either of our lives until we went to school.

It was the day we went to school that Jota and I fell out for the first time. Of course we had argued and sulked, but until then we had both been too

dependent upon each other ever to cut off our nose to spite our face. My parents and Jota's parents both accepted our friendship as something that caused them less trouble than any other acquaintance, and if we fought we suffered for it, and we knew it. Other kids either of us brought home were not welcome. Neither Jota's parents nor mine wanted outsiders poking their noses in, even children -- behind children were adults, usually.

So Jota and I, fairly intelligent kids, had realized long since that fighting with each other didn't pay.

At school, a maelstrom of noise, high laughter, peculiar smells, unaccustomed regimentation, girls (neither Jota nor I had ever had anything to do with girls and had quite made up our minds we never would), harsh-voiced adults pretending to be on our side, huge windows, endless corridors, electric light in the daytime, stairs, frightening large boys and girls, even more frightening people in black coats and square hats, one thing stood out in my memory -- the howl of laughter when Jota said his name was Clarence.

The teacher laughed too, though she tried to pretend she hadn't.

They laughed again, twice as loudly, when he added the second half, Mulliner.

I wanted to jump up and hit the whole lot of them. They hadn't laughed when, just before, I had said I was Val Mathers. My real Christian name was Valentine, but I'd always been called Val, so that's what I said. Now everybody was laughing at Clarence Mulliner, my pal.

I didn't jump up because . . . well, I didn't jump up.

The funny thing was that as we were going home, free for the rest of the day -- the first day was a half day -- I giggled myself at the recollection of the childish laughter when Clarence, all unwittingly, gave his name. It was childlike -- when they laughed at Clarence, my friend, I wanted to fight them all (though I didn't). But afterwards . . . well, I laughed so much I could hardly walk.

Clarence -- I called him Clarence then, and went on doing so until he became, for all time, Jota -- didn't lose his temper at once. He waited for me to return to normal. But I couldn't. The more I laughed the funnier it all became.

And then he hit me once, on the chest, and ran away.

My laughter slowly died, not because I'd been hurt, not really because I was sorry I'd laughed, but mainly because I had, after all, been laughing at Jota. So long as he stayed to be laughed at I went on doing it. But there's no point in laughing at someone who doesn't hang around to be laughed at.

I went home. I tried to see Jota, but nobody answered the door.

At tea-time I wasn't hungry. Later I was sick. My father, even my mother, began to get concerned. I went to bed with a hot-water bottle.

Next morning I was no better and the doctor was sent for. He examined me thoroughly, and then he and my father talked at the foot of the bed in low tones. Later my father came and sat on the bed and talked quietly. to me.

At the time I didn't understand, didn't realize there was anything to understand except that I was ill.

But many years later it was easy to guess what the doctor had said and what my father thought about it, and what must have been in his mind when he talked to me.

The doctor had been unable to find anything wrong with me, yet obviously I was quite seriously ill. Being a young, up-to-date doctor, he immediately thought of psychosomatic illness. It figured. I lived in a strange home -- he knew that, being the doctor for the whole family. I had just gone to school. He had found a case, a quite interesting case, of a child of five, otherwise apparently normal, prostrated by psychosomatic illness.

Jota came to see me at lunch-time (the first school day had been a morning

only, but on the second there was a short period of afternoon school too). He was quiet, puzzled, and very contrite. He seemed to think he was responsible for my illness because he had punched me on the chest.

I told him that was silly, there wasn't even a mark, and I was sorry I'd laughed at him.

I was ill for three weeks, and never fully recovered that first school term.

There was a very small incident about two years later . . .

It was the next time Jota and I really quarreled. Miranda didn't seem to know anything about this. I was quite unable to remember what the quarrel was about, or any details, except that Jota finally grew cold, stared at me, and said: "I'll fix you . . . " in a tone of menace quite startling coming from a seven-year-old boy.

And that was all. Nothing happened . . .

Miranda was puzzled. She had been making me remember things, not as I might have expected, by being in possession of all the facts and prompting my flagging memory, but by directing my attention to certain types of incident in my relations with Jota.

And this incident had her beat. She tried to make me remember that Jota had not really been in a cold fury with me, or that he got over it at once.

In fact, Jota and I ceased to be friends for fully three months, and during that time he made no secret of the fact that he hated me.

I was, after all, a much more normal boy than Jota, and I made other friends. He stayed solitary, walking home alone, standing in the playground alone.

And it was because of this that we finally became friends again.

One of my new friends was Gil Carswell, who was studious but not always quiet. In those days he was a sort of juvenile Jekyll and Hyde, usually the best boy in the school from the point of view of authority, intelligent, polite, hard-working, good at games, a paragon of schoolboy virtues. But now and then he'd kick over the traces . . .

However, this incident had very little to do with Gil, not until it was over, anyway.

It was the morning interval. I was with Gil. Across the playground, beside the bush which divided the junior boys' section from the girls', Jota was standing alone, as usual, staring into space, his mind far away.

About a dozen boys were kicking a ball around near him. Inevitably the ball went near him and one of the boys chasing it came close to Jota.

They didn't come in contact, and across the playground I had no idea what was said. I was watching only idly, until the group began to gather round Jota, and I began to have a vague, though fundamentally correct, idea of what was happening.

No wild animals are as cruel as children. They don't know how.

Jota, by standing alone, had set himself apart as a target, as a victim. The boys (bigger than us, from a higher class) were taunting him, trying to outdo each other in the wit and the virulence of their insults.

Automatically Gil and I moved across the playground. Nothing draws boys more surely and quickly than a fight, and it was obvious there was going to be a fight.

We weren't the only ones. Everyone in the playground was crowding to the same spot. Even some of the girls behind the hedge and fence were beginning to take notice, the bigger girls looking over, the smaller ones

jumping up to take a quick look.

There were three playgrounds at the old Grammar School. Everything was old, dingy and overcrowded, and the playgrounds were far too small. Round at the back, completely cut off from us, were the senior boys. But all the girls, from five to eighteen, were in the same section. The idea was, presumably, that big boys might bully small boys, but girls didn't do things like that.

One of the boys baiting Jota began to jump at him and touch him, leaping back immediately. Two or three others followed suit.

Jota tried to pick one of them and fight him, to turn the affair into a simple playground brawl. Nineteen times out of twenty this would have worked and the incident would not have developed further. This time, however, the boy he picked tore himself away, electing to go on with the game, and his pals tacitly agreed on the same course. Every time Jota lunged, he was pushed back, kept at bay.

Now every boy in the playground was crowded round Jota. I caught only occasional glimpses of him. His face was white and he had gone beyond anger into sheer terror. Half a dozen boys ganging up on one can swiftly reduce him to blubbering misery. Jota was alone against the whole junior school. And it was too late to change the pattern of events.

Bolstering each other up, the tormentors were becoming bolder. At first they merely touched Jota lightly when they leaped at him. Then they punched him. Then they started pulling his tie, grabbing his shirt, clawing at his buttons.

Still a few feet of space was left between Jota and the heaving mass of boys, tacitly maintained to keep Jota the quarry and everyone else a hunter.

His nose was bleeding and blood was running down his chin from a cut at the corner of his mouth. Most of us were howling -- I believe I was howling with the rest. We were huntsmen, and we had cornered the fox. We were out for the kill.

When his shirt came out of his pants, we shrieked with laughter. Now he was not merely an object of derision, he was an object of fun. He was comic (like a fat, naked old Jew being beaten along a ghetto with gun barrels). Some quick-witted tormentor grabbed a handful of earth from under the bushes and managed to get most of it inside the top of Jota's pants.

It was about then that I ceased enjoying myself. I was as mindlessly cruel as most boys of seven or eight, I suppose. But even then I knew there were limits, that even a mob has to retain some grasp on common humanity, or the human race is done for.

I didn't realize until years and years later that there must have been scores among us who felt the same way. What did we do? Nothing; of course. Principally we were afraid that if we did anything we might find ourselves in Jota's place.

He was near the end of his tether. His shirt, minus all buttons, was now hanging open under his jacket, and his thin white chest was heaving at frightening speed.

There was no sign of any let-up. On the contrary, the immediate ring of boy-baiters, encouraged by those behind, kept searching for further torments. The time for mere taunts was long since gone -- the noise was such that only screams could be heard over it.

One boy took out a small pocket-knife, opened it and made passes at Jota with it. He never went very near him: yet if there had been a roar of encouragement, he'd have been emboldened to go in with the knife.

Flight had never seemed possible for Jota, since from the beginning he had been hemmed in against the bush and fence. But in his extremity he suddenly did something that none of us expected.

He leaped back, seized the top of the fence and somehow drew himself over. The next moment he was in the girls' playground.

For a moment the shouts died as if we'd all been struck dumb. Then the whole mass of boys charged the fence, ignoring the bushes, and although none of us got over as Jota had done, we were all hanging over the fence, watching, if not chasing, our quarry, hunting him with our eyes and our shouts.

The little girls all ran away, screaming. Boys were not supposed to be in the girls' playground. It was a rule, and not one of the hundreds of rules made to be broken. Nobody had expected Jota even to try to get into the girls' playground.

One massive woman of seventeen or eighteen caught Jota by the collar and lifted him. There was a scream of laughter on both sides of the fence. She did it again . . .

He fell out of his jacket and she was left holding it. He darted for the gate.

We rushed to our gate. He was on the other side of the road, panting desperately. Habit was so strong that he wanted to come back (the interval must be nearly over). But scores of boys were hanging over the gate.

I didn't think. I jumped over the gate and ran across the road. Jota flinched and turned, evidently thinking that even the school boundary couldn't stop the chase.

But I caught his arm. "Come on back, Clarence," I said.

Once again the shouting and howling died.

Suddenly sanity was restored. I had done quite a bit to restore it, but could take little credit for it. By standing with Jota, by allying myself with him, I had reminded everybody that he was one of us, not an outlaw to be taken dead or alive, not a fox to be slaughtered as bloodily as possible, not a mouse to be tortured and broken and perhaps left, mercilessly, still alive.

I could take very little credit because I should have done this long before, because instead of doing it when I might have turned the entire incident I

had been howling with the rest.

Anyway, as the shouting died, the whistle to end the break shrilled, and we all trooped back into school, including Jota and me.

The fun was over.

Gil, Jota and I became friends after that. Curiously, Jota's fifteen-minute ordeal was ignored and forgotten and canceled as if it had never happened.

The teachers must have known something had happened. Signs of the damage to bushes and fences were still visible six months later. Jota could not have looked anything like his usual self in class, although his nose had stopped bleeding, his face had been washed, and his jacket -- thrown over the fence by one of the girls -- hid the ruin of his shirt.

In any event, nothing was done. And the boys at the school, too, scarcely remembered the episode. One or two of them, I knew, tried to taunt Jota later -- but they were unwise enough to do it individually, and in such circumstances Jota was perfectly capable of looking after himself.

Looking after himself . . .

Two weeks later, there was a special assembly. The Head was very grave. Two boys, close friends, had died in one day, one of hitherto unsuspected heart trouble, and the other in a road accident. A special service was held: all the good things the boys had ever done were detailed, and everything else quietly forgotten.

I knew, of course, that these two had been the ringleaders in the humiliation of Jota. But no significance in that fact, beyond the obvious coincidence, occurred to me. Jota could hardly have any control over road accidents, especially since at the time it happened he was with Gil and me and clearly had nothing in his mind beyond our search for birds' nests. I might, at that age, have believed that God had punished them for their wickedness. It

didn't cross my mind that Jota had.

Miranda didn't make me remember subsequent events in any detail, except one -- one which introduced an entirely new concept.

There had been the case of Squire Badgeley . . . He wasn't a squire at all, but he looked like one and he owned an orchard. Probably for every apple that he got, the boys of Shuteley Grammar School got two. In my earliest recollections of the squire, he seemed quite philosophical about this.

But now it was wartime. We were too young to take much note of the war; the restrictions and shortages we accepted as we accepted the rain and the wind, and our memories of a time when there was no need to pull curtains at night and when unlimited good things were obtainable merely on production of cash were dim and vague.

But Squire Badgeley took note of the war. He had three sons in the RAF, and his one daughter worked with him, a Land Girl as we called them then. In addition to apples, he grew raspberries, blackcurrants and a wide range of vegetables. And we boys not only stole his fruit, but damaged and destroyed his carrots, turnips, cabbages and lettuces.

He became an ogre (from our angle). He guarded his orchard, chased us, and reported us to the Head. The Head, whom we dimly remembered being as philosophical as the squire had once been about our depredations, now became astonishingly harsh.

Jota was caught once, and the squire beat him.

Two weeks later the squire died. But that wasn't the end of the Badgeley story.

It was not until long after the war that we broke our vows about girls. Jota broke his first. One week he obviously didn't know any more than we did about the birds and the bees, though we were all becoming hotly interested:

the next, he was able to tell us, in remarkable detail, everything we could possibly want to know.

We didn't really believe his stories at first. But soon it was impossible not to believe them. Girls of all ages swarmed around Jota. (He was Jota now, duly having been christened by Mr. Samuel, the science master.) In juvenile masculine arrogance he used to induce us to deride his chances with a particular girl, often four or five years older than he was, and then make the conquest, and prove it.

This was before the days of widespread promiscuity at mixed schools. Shuteley was an old-fashioned town, too, well behind the times. Senior girls did not then wear yellow goliwogs to claim loss of virginity. If Jota had not existed, only one or two of the most forward senior girls would have had furtive nocturnal adventures, mainly with boys of the town who had left school. Fewer still of the senior boys would have had such experiences, and they would have been with willing farm girls rather than the supposedly pure senior girls.

Jota, on his own, created an unprecedented situation. Every apple ripe enough to pluck, he plucked. He collected girls like stamps. It made not the slightest difference what form they were in, from Third to Sixth. He knew enough, of course, not to leave a trail of illegitimate babies behind him. I believe that throughout his life, only when he was too impatient for a particular girl did he ever take chances.

It was not long after Dina was born that Gil, goaded by Jota's fantastic success and the fact that Gil and I were still virgins, and likely to remain so for some time, hit on a challenge that was to reduce Jota to size.

He brought up the name of Anne Badgeley.

All three of Squire Badgeley's sons had been killed in the war. Anne, left alone, ran the orchard herself, with hired hands to help her. Although she could hardly be said to be fortunate, money was not one of her problems. She was certainly the richest girl in Shuteley.

At the time when Gil made his outrageous suggestion, she was probably one of the most desirable girls in the town, and undoubtedly the most desired. There wasn't much doubt that the reason why she hadn't married was tied up with her wealth. Whether the average young man in town wanted Anne, her orchard or her money most was a matter for conjecture. But he certainly wanted all three.

She was still in the first half of her twenties, and Jota was not less than ten years younger. She didn't exactly seem old to us, being younger than Betty Grable, Rita Hayworth and Lana Turner, whose pin-up photographs we were beginning to stick up in our bachelor bedrooms. Indeed, with her habit of working in the summer in her orchard dressed like our pin-up girls, she was the nearest real thing to the gorgeous creatures of our adolescent dreams.

She worked in the orchard behind a fence and a high hedge, but peepholes could always be found, and the summer working clothes of Anne Badgeley were a daily topic of inflamed speculation among us. When she wore slacks we lost interest, or some interest, but when she wore shorts and particularly one day when above her tight shorts she made do with a flimsy chiffon scarf, carelessly tied, she rocked the male half of the Grammar School to its foundations.

But she was as much out of reach as Betty, Rita and Lana. The very idea of Jota and Anne, Anne and Jota, was ridiculous, which was why Gil made the suggestion.

Jota took the challenge. And a week later, he made us hide in the orchard to watch.

Late on a hot summer evening, he and Anne came out . . .

Gil and I were part shocked, part disgusted, but mainly wildly envious. Why had Jota been singled out to be able to do such things? The girl was head over heels in love with him; he could do anything he liked with her, even we could see that.

In the autumn, Anne died. She fell off a ladder and broke her back.

Chapter Eleven

Dina was still asleep. She changed her position easily, regularly, without fuss and without making a noise.

Around us now, beyond the stasis, was a red glow. It would be many hours yet before it would be possible for Dina and I, unless wearing one of the giants' suits, to leave the spot. But the fire had consumed nearly all there was to consume.

The Great Fire of London had burned for days. Wartime fires started by incendiaries had often been blazing still when the bombers returned the following night. Shuteley, however, was annihilated in a relatively small, exceedingly fierce, shockingly rapid fire. What remained would glow for a long time, but little or nothing remained to blaze.

And there was one suit in the stasis. As I understood it, just before dawn the stasis would disappear and Miranda would be plucked back to her own time. But anyone not of her party would simply be left suddenly without the protection of the stasis, to die.

Certainly to die. There would be enough heat left to char the ground, to burn Dina and me apparently as all the other victims had been burned -- more slowly but no less surely, so that when people from outside first reached the village green (that afternoon? Next day?) there would be no indication that the stasis had ever existed, or of the identity of the two blackened skeletons in it.

But I was still oddly unconcerned about this. There was one suit, and there was still plenty of time. Anyway, I did not believe I was going to die. Dina could have the suit. Dina, whom I expected to recover consciousness soon, could make her escape . . . and I wouldn't die.

"What are you telling me?" I asked Miranda.

She shrugged. "I've been careful not to tell you anything. You're telling me."

"But I'm remembering what you tell me to remember. That Mr. Sylvester was a nuisance to Jota, and he died. That Jota quarreled with me, and I nearly died. That the two boys who led the mob against Jota died. That Squire Badgeley beat Jota, and he died. That Anne Badgeley -- "

"You're missing out some very important things. About all those girls, schoolgirls mostly, but older girls too. Particularly Anne. She could have had anyone in Shuteley, you said. Why did she pick a kid barely into his teens?"

"You're saying Jota did all this. Any man he wants out of the way dies? Any girl he wants says yes?"

She nodded. "He has the Gift. And you're wrong to say any *man* . What about Anne? When he'd finished with her, he made her die."

"Why would he want rid of her?"

"The oldest reason, probably. She was pregnant. With others he was more careful. With her he was too impatient, too reckless. And it seemed to Jota that it would be better for him if Anne died."

"You're saying he condemned all these people to death?"

"No," she said thoughtfully. "Not that. I imagine that at first, he simply

thought, perhaps not even consciously: 'Everything would be fine but for Mr. Sylvester.' And soon Mr. Sylvester wasn't there. But after this had happened a few times, Jota must have begun to realize . . . There's another thing he obviously has found out by this time -- with the ability to attack goes defense. Nobody can kill Jota. No *person* can kill Jota. Of course he could die by accident, like anyone else -- his power is over people. Originally he died in this fire -- "

"Wait," I said. "That doesn't jell. I just killed him. Yesterday Greg killed him. You say that before you intervened, the fire killed him. Seems that for an indestructible character he gets destroyed a hell of a lot."

Miranda was following her own train of thought, not mine. "Later, in adolescence, he found out something else. After any girl refused him -- "

"No girl ever refused him," I said.

"Oh, yes. Time after time. You weren't there. Neither was I, but I can tell you what happened. The *first* meeting was always as you'd expect. But later -- a girl who sneered at Jota would come crawling to him, She'd beg him, as I -- "

She flushed. "I think you heard what Greg and I were saying at the bridge. You're wrong if you've any idea that people with the Gift are smooth, practiced lovers. They don't have to be. It's crude, it's bestial. They say: 'I want. you,' and that's it. Not the first time. The Gift needs time to work. When Jota or Greg wants a man dead, he doesn't drop on the spot. It takes time to happen."

The paradoxes and inconsistencies that had bothered me were gradually melting away.

I could see how Greg could have killed Jota. If two people had this Gift, presumably it was canceled out. Greg had no special power over Jota, but then Jota had no special defense against Greg. So the matter was settled simply with pistols. There was also the cryptic exchange between them which I now understood better:

GREG: You're a bit like me. JOTA: In more ways than one. GREG: Remember . . . I killed you. JOTA: Remember . . . I let you.

Yes . . . I understood and accepted that. I also understood and accepted this new explanation of Jota's power over women. He approached them, they reacted exactly as they wished, free to do as they wished (I now remembered I had never been privileged to see any of the preliminaries, only the consequences). Later, when *something* had worked on them, they became possessed, clay in Jota's hands.

More of the inconsistencies dissolved when I looked at them. Jota had been brutish toward both Sheila and Dina. That was how it started. Later, if he persisted, things would be very different. But instinctively wise in the case of Sheila, I had sent Jota away, unconsciously knowing what Sheila hated me for thinking, that what she thought or wanted or said didn't count, only what Jota wanted . . . And as for Dina, there had not been an Act Two and there never would be.

Then, having prepared the way, Miranda told me about the Gift in her own world.

I don't remember her words. She spoke for a long time. A lot of what she said I didn't believe at first, but gradually disbelief was borne down.

Greg and Jota and three percent of the population in 2097 had a Gift which was quite simply ability to make people die or surrender sexually. It was nothing else.

It was fundamentally a masculine phenomenon. So few women possessed it that they were freaks, usually choosing to conceal, abandon, deny their possession of the Gift.

Those with the Gift, then, were men, and if they didn't rule the world, they prevented anyone else from ruling it effectively.

Most of them, fortunately, were law-abiding . . . but what could be done about the rogues like Greg? Virtually nothing. That was why Greg was present on an expedition aimed at the limitation or even destruction of his kind, able to sabotage it at will, because nobody could stop him.

Miranda couldn't stop him. If Greg cared to decide at any moment that she should die, and simply decided it instead of crudely, impulsively and rashly trying to break her body with one blow, then she would die in less than two weeks. And the cause of death could not legally be connected with Greg.

I protested at this. Had no murder charge ever been brought against one of these people? When the Gift was known to exist, when threats had been made, when a death duly took place exactly as forecast, surely . . . ?

"Think, Val," said Miranda wearily. "Take the clearest possible case . . . imagine the clearest possible case, and then think about it. The detectives who built up the case would have to be immune. The cops who arrested the accused would have to be immune. The jailers, judge, jury, and lawyers would have to be immune. And in common justice they'd have to prove that the accused had the Gift, and had used it deliberately to end another person's life."

She shook her head. "It can't be done. Especially since the actual cause of death is always natural -- illness, accident or suicide, with no physical intervention by the real killer."

So Greg was with the Shuteley party. Some of those who had tried to stop him had died. Threats were enough to silence the others. Miranda's attitude, a perfectly reasonable one after all, was that she could at least keep an eye on him and try to defeat him.

In addition to ordinary people and those who had the Gift, there were some who were simply immune. They did not possess the Gift; but those who did could accomplish nothing against them. Unfortunately there were fewer of these than those who had the Gift.

The Gift, and immunity, were hereditary. This did not mean that the Gift was often passed on. It merely meant that it could be passed on.

Miranda's world, the world of the giants (women of five feet four were as rare in her world, she told me, as women of four feet eleven in ours) was a good world on the surface, and a seething cesspool of fear and chaos and self-destruction underneath.

And all because of the Gift.

The sexual side of it, she pointed out, was virtually unimportant. That was merely a by-product, a side issue. It existed, probably, because sex as well as survival was basic. Anyone who could control life and death could also control the sex impulse.

That was nothing. A small minority of Casanovas could be a nuisance, but they couldn't push a whole world over a precipice.

The threat of death was another matter altogether. There was no need for any Greg to be educated, clever, handsome, careful, obliging, efficient or self-respecting. Anyone who said or did anything a Greg didn't like could be rubbed out and forgotten. It was senseless to be brave when faced with a Greg. After he had eradicated you, he could quite easily, on the merest whim, eradicate your wife and family as well.

As far as anyone knew, the Gift was a chance mutation. Immunity was probably allied to it, though no one could be sure. Immunity might have existed always, unrecognized, purposeless, until the Gift emerged.

Twisting of time was only one of the desperate measures tried in an attempt to restore sanity to the world of 2097. Miranda hinted at others, refused to tell me about any, and said that anyway, they had all failed miserably, sometimes tragically.

I started to suggest one angle that occurred to me, the arrangement of accidents, since Gregs could be killed in accidents like anybody else, and she cut me off rather impatiently. Such attempts were the most disastrous of

all. They made all people who possessed the Gift, including those who steadfastly refused to use it, band together for their own survival.

So we came to the purpose of the Shuteley operation.

Clearly if everybody possessed the Gift, or if everybody was immune, or if everybody was one or the other, the problem would cease to exist.

According to the river-of-time theory, the people of 2097 would continue to exist no matter what was done to the past, short of a major diversion which would force the flow into a completely different course. But their capacities might be changed. Miranda might, after certain changes had been made, find herself immune. Or she might have the Gift. Or nobody might have the Gift.

It was a desperate scheme, born of desperation. It was carried out in a manner little short of insanity, in a completely useless attempt to get the whole thing done under cover.

It was entrusted to an ordinary history class in an ordinary school under an ordinary teacher.

A history class would go back and see the Great Fire of Shuteley, 1966 A.D. They would do nothing to alter the flow of events except remove Garry Carswell . . .

That was the cover: a minor operation like many others (none of them directed against possessors of the Gift), of no particular interest to anyone not directly concerned. Miranda knew all about it, but none of the students did. As far as they were concerned, the rescue of Garry Carswell, and a few others, was all that was involved, apart from the opportunity to see the Great Fire.

It might possibly have worked.

But three percent possession of the Gift meant that one in thirty-three adults, teenagers or children had it. So no school was free of it.

Greg was in another class, a lower class. He applied to join the expedition to 1966. The headmaster, the far more important people behind the headmaster and the less important people below, all knew that the inclusion of Greg would ruin everything.

But Greg had made up his mind, and nothing else mattered. It wasn't even possible to cancel the scheme. Greg, if he felt like it, could easily block the cancelation.

Greg went with the party.

"Now Jota," I said. "Tell me why you want Jota."

She hesitated. "It's only a theory that if we saved Jota the situation might improve. Perhaps it would be worse . . . You've been baffled in the last twenty-four hours by what we know and what we don't know, Val. We knew that Jota would arrive at your office at 3:10 this afternoon, but I didn't know Dina existed. We had pictures of you, so I knew you when I saw you in the bar, but we had no picture of Jota, and that's why I came to your office -- to see him, to be able to recognize him, so that there would be no possibility of mistaken identity later. We didn't know, of course, that you and he would go to the camp, because that was a new train of events altogether."

"Why didn't you do some preliminary scouting?"

"For several reasons, but the main one was to try to rush this through without attracting the attention of people like Greg. It wasn't supposed to be a big, important operation, just -- "

"Just a sight-seeing tour," I said.

"Well, yes. Anyway, one thing we do know for certain is that around you here in Shuteley in 1966 there were important elements in the Gift-immunity hereditary lines. Some were strong, some weak . . . it's possible

that the whole situation developed from a single latent mutant who lived here thirty or fifty or eighty years ago. But we haven't been able to trace any such person."

"You hoped saving Jota would give more people in your time the Gift. Or better still, immunity without the effect."

"That's it exactly. Leaving Jota to die, as he did originally, obviously didn't stop the spread of the mutation. Historians believe that saving his strain may do what you just said. One thing we are sure of is that the immunity strain is here too, if we can somehow develop it. But all we can do, all we know about to try, is to save Jota. He was the first, by far the first, to possess the Gift complete. Decades were to pass before anyone appeared with the power so fully developed -- "

"And he really had no children?"

"We think not. We're almost sure that . . . "

She stopped suddenly.

I followed the direction of her eyes and saw Greg.

He was carrying a spare suit, which he dropped when he saw Miranda. His expression answered one question. He had meant to kill her, and thought he had.

Yet he didn't say "How did you get here?" He demanded: " What have you done? "

She stood up. "What could I do?" There was a slight emphasis on the "I."

"I've lost it," he said hoarsely. "Something's taken it away from me. I felt it go . . . I couldn't test it with death, that takes too long, And I wanted to know. I tested it with girls. With Harrie, Wendy, Mary, Chloe. They couldn't

understand it either . . . But they all hate me, can you understand that?"

Miranda seemed to grow as tall as Greg. A great joy flooded her. "You've lost it?" she said. "Maybe there is natural justice after all. You're just a kid now, a great overgrown kid. And helpless."

"Helpless?" he almost shouted, drawing himself up to his enormous height. Yet he was almost blubbing. Curiously enough, I could understand him. I'd known Jota for a long time. Jota had a strange Gift, and, I now believed, very little else. His power, his personality, his success had all come from something he couldn't help. He had Something; he wasn't Somebody.

It's not necessarily true, as you're always told when you're a kid, that a bully must be a coward. Yet there is a weakness, if not necessarily in courage. A strong, brave, whole man or boy doesn't have to prove himself at the expense of the weak. He may trample carelessly on the weak, as strong men do. But he doesn't seek out the weak to torture and humiliate them. He'd rather engage in a real contest with someone his own size.

Jota and Greg had this in common, I now saw, that the thing that set them apart was important to them, vital to them. They weren't like a banker who happened to be a talented violinist, enjoying playing the violin for his own pleasure and that of others, but with no compulsion to tell every new bank client at once that he was a brilliant violinist. As far as I knew Jota hadn't used his Gift to kill more than half a dozen people. But he'd had to go on making amatory conquests -- he'd been forced to go on. Now that I had the key I could see his Don Juan activities in a different light, and no longer envied him in the slightest. Every girl who didn't want him had to be made to want him . . .

Greg, however, was the problem of the moment. As he and Miranda faced each other, I knew that the way this whole thing would go depended on what happened now between Greg and Miranda -- and me. Because I mattered, too.

"Yes, helpless," I said. "But you knew that quite a while ago, Greg, didn't you? You just didn't want to believe it."

He looked at me as if astonished to see me there. Then, remembering, he looked around. His gaze passed over the sleeping Dina without stopping. "Where's Jota?" he said.

I had become strong and confident. I felt it, as Greg had felt his reduction to size, but the opposite way. I didn't even have to stand up. I was still sitting on the burnt earth.

"I killed him, Greg," I said. "He was trying to add Dina to his list. I didn't mean to kill him, but I'm not sorry he's dead. I'm beginning to think his death was necessary."

"You killed him," Greg murmured. " You killed him."

"Why pretend to be surprised? You wanted to kill me, and couldn't. You had to save me instead. I guess you managed to convince yourself that you didn't need to kill me in the fire, that it was neater and cleverer and just as efficient to bring me here to die when the stasis was removed. But the truth was, you couldn't kill me. The most you could do was place me in circumstances where I might die."

It was Miranda's turn not to be able to follow what was going on. She had a glimmering of understanding, but there was still a lot she couldn't fit into place.

Greg understood. He stared at me with naked hate, and clothed fear. "Who are you, Val Mathers?" he whispered.

"Nobody in particular," I said. "But once Jota wanted to get rid of me. He nearly got rid of me, and I came back. And the next time he wanted to get rid of me, I didn't feel a thing. And an hour or two ago, you tried to kill me. But you couldn't, could you? You had to bring me here instead, and just *hope* I'd die. And when Jota and I fought, he died."

Miranda was standing quite still. "You're immune, Val," she whispered. "You were the first neutral. Only your life had no effect, because you never

had children. But after what I told you . . . "

I understood now. I understood what had changed, and why.

Jota was an irrelevance anyway. In the first run of these few days, he had died; in the second, he still died. So he was unimportant. He was a red herring.

I was different. In the first fire, I hadn't died, evidently (or I'd never have become the scapegoat). In the fire altered by the intervention of the giants, I was certain I wasn't going to die either. But one thing differed: but for Miranda, I'd never have had children. Now (I trusted her -- on the whole I trusted her) I certainly would.

And Greg became impotent.

Yet not, perhaps, entirely impotent, in all senses.

His attention was all on me now. "You," he muttered. "It must be you. By intervening, we mixed you up in this thing in a way you never were before. Before we took a hand, you and Sheila and Dina stayed at home and never knew a thing was happening until it was over. Your curtains were drawn, nobody phoned you, the lights didn't fail, you heard no noise. You went to bed and slept, the three of you, and it wasn't until the next day that you discovered Shuteley had been burned to the ground. But we intervened, and . . . "

"And Jota still died," I said. "That was what you, Greg, wanted -- until a little while ago. When you lost your precious Gift you realized that somehow what was happening here tonight had snuffed the Gift out. It never developed. It was beaten here . . . or else, who knows, the elements that enabled it to be beaten between your time and mine were brought together."

"Yes," Miranda murmured.

"And you changed your mind completely," I said to Greg. "Miranda was here to save Jota, you to make sure he stayed dead -- because both of you believed that that would weaken the Gift in your time. A little while ago, when you found you'd lost it, you decided, and perhaps you were right, that Jota had to be saved. Save him, and maybe you saved the Gift after all. So you came back for him. But you're too late, Greg -- I killed Jota."

He leaped at me.

I was on the ground. The advantage wasn't all with Greg; already on the ground, I could move faster there than he could. He landed heavily where I had recently been. Knowing I was not involved in a cheerful, sporting contest, I kicked him in the kidney as I got up. After that, his movements were slower. I also managed to hit him in the groin before he got his bearings.

Yet when he was up, hurt badly and slowed down, I was instantly in trouble. Miranda tried to help, and was canceled out in two seconds. A single backhand swipe that caught her on the shoulder, with most of Greg's 250 pounds behind it, finished her interest in the contest at the moment it began.

Greg had not taken time to take off his suit. The fact, on the whole, favored me. The plastic afforded him some protection, and he was hard to grasp properly. But the heat his efforts generated was trapped in the suit. I also guessed that the air supply from the tank at the back was constant, not enough to sustain continued desperate activity.

Coming to the same conclusion as me, Greg tried to win grace to remove his suit. And I kept at him so that he couldn't. Soon he was gasping like a grassed fish.

He hit me once, and although it was only a glancing blow on my right breast, the pain and numbness that went through me showed me my only chance was either to hit Greg without being hit myself, or to fight him as I had fought Jota.

Using his weight, I brought off a knee-drop which hurt him badly. Nevertheless, it was perhaps a mistake, for he got up so mad that I knew I was engaged in not much less than a fight to the death, perhaps nothing less at all.

He couldn't get his suit off. Every time he tried, I hit him or butted him or threw him.

My tactics paid off, for when suddenly he caught me a stinging blow on the side of the head and I reeled, defenseless for a moment, he chose to use the moment gained to get the suit off rather than to follow up his advantage. And that was a life for me.

By the time he had stripped to his briefs I was able to go on.

The trend of the struggle changed. While he'd been wearing his suit there had been no point in trying to throw him through the stasis wall. Now there was.

I was deliberately trying to do what I had done quite accidentally in Jota's case -- burn Greg to death. The blaze outside our bubble of coolness was dying now, and yet the embers were so hot that if Greg rolled out into them, he'd die as surely as Jota had.

Unlike Jota, however, Greg knew what would happen. And he was trying to do the same to me.

He threw me once, by brute strength, and then launched himself at me, intending to wind me with his weight. I rolled partly clear, but he grabbed me and held me. He was on top, and I could do nothing about his weight. He started to swing at my head a blow which would have ended my interest in the fight.

Then he fell on top of me, limp.

I extricated myself. Dina was standing over us. She had picked up a stone and hit Greg with it.

"Have I killed him?" she asked anxiously.

"I don't care if you have," I gasped.

"I didn't mean to kill him. But if I didn't knock him out, he'd have taken the stone from me. So I had to hit pretty hard."

"You haven't killed him, Dina," I said, moving from Greg to Miranda, who was dazedly picking herself up. I offered her a hand, but she shook her head and sat down again, taking a breather. Greg had been pretty rough with her that night.

I turned back to Dina, who was a singularly attractive stranger. She wore a crisp white blouse which in the middle of all this was spotless, a short black skirt with a wide belt, nylons and stiletto shoes. She must have been fully protected from the beginning.

I asked her what had happened.

"I was watching television with Barbara and Gil," she said. "We heard shouting first. Then the television suddenly went off. And there was a glow at the window. The next thing, there was a glow at the other window. Gil shouted: 'Get Garry and we'll go to the cellar.' "

So that was how it had happened . . . Before the giants intervened, when Barbara and Gil were alone in the house with Garry, Gil's first reaction had been to seek refuge in the cellar. A very reasonable idea, really . . . the trouble was, he thought the fire that apparently surrounded them was an ordinary fire, and it wasn't. In an ordinary fire, the cellar of Gil's house would have been a perfect funkhole. But in the fire that was to come, any cellar would become an oven, and anyone within would be baked slowly and very painfully to death.

They had just reached the cellar when two big youths in plastic suits

appeared and practically dragged them back into the hall of the house. Barbara, frightened, did exactly as she was told; Dina, curious, was glad to get out of the dingy cellar and have a chance of seeing what was happening; Gll, dazed, had to be shouted at before anything registered; and Garry slept peacefully through the whole thing.

There had been a curious wait while people screamed outside, while crowds ran past the house, while the red glow became bright enough to replace the lights which had gone out. The youths in plastic suits didn't speak, didn't answer Barbara's hysterical questions. Yet they had a comforting air of knowing exactly what they were doing.

Unhurriedly they unwrapped a bundle and made Gil, Barbara, Dina and Garry put on fire-suits -- the simpler version I had seen. And still they all waited.

Then, quite suddenly, it was time to move. The giants gave the baby to Barbara, opened the door, and they moved out.

It was indescribable -- at any rate, Dina entirely failed to describe it.

They walked along a street of fire. No one saw them because nobody not wearing a suit could be there to see them. They felt no heat, breathed easily and their eyes did not smart.

They had, after all, only a few hundred yards to go. Before they realized it, they were in an area of comparative silence, completely calm, and cool, fresh air.

The suits were at once taken from them. They would be used again and again that night.

There were others in the stasis, many others -- frightened, bewildered people. More were brought in every moment, in plastic suits which were removed as they arrived.

Beyond this point Dina knew little or nothing more, because then Miranda

had appeared and taken her aside.

"She gave me a pill," said Dina. "And I fell asleep."

I looked past her at Miranda. That the giants had powers that were remarkable to us was undeniable: that these powers were, after all, limited was equally clear.

I could understand that Miranda's powers had been able to make of Dina a whole person for the first time in her life. But that this could be achieved merely by giving her a pill I could not believe.

Unseen by Dina, Miranda made a gesture. Its meaning was plain: she was telling me not to pursue this.

Maybe she was right. I knew all I had to know.

Looking at Dina, I marveled. She didn't have any words she hadn't had before; she didn't have any experience she had before.

But . . . Dina was normal. She couldn't have explained things as she had, understanding in retrospect, unless she'd become something much nearer an ordinary seventeen-year-old than she'd ever been.

Dina had never before told me a long and fairly complicated story which I could understand. "She made me," referring to Sheila, was about the most I could expect.

"I'm grateful," I said to Miranda, and I meant it.

Feeling better, Miranda stood up. There was pain in her face, but only physical pain, and that was nothing. She glowed with happiness, relief, satisfaction.

"Success by mistake," she said. "It often happens. History is like that. We

made dozens of mistakes and got the right answer. You matter, Val, not Jota. Greg . . . "

She shrugged, looking down at him. "I can handle him now."

"I wouldn't be too sure," I said.

She was completely confident. "He knows now. He'll be a disgruntled, dazed child when he comes round. He won't give me any trouble. But now we have two suits -- three suits. Val, take Dina and get out now. Greg and I will be all right We'll be snapped back with the stasis."

She smiled. "And have many, many children. You and Sheila -- and Dina. She may be involved, too. She may even be the one that matters . . . no, it must be you. Yet Dina, too, didn't have children before, presumably, and will now -- "

For Miranda it was over. Mission accomplished. She hadn't failed after all, although, as she'd admitted, she had succeeded through luck and not much else.

But for me it wasn't over. I had still failed. I'd still get the lion's share of the blame for the Great Fire of Shuteley. I'd still deserve a lot of it. The word "mathe:r would still go into the language.

The kids Miranda wanted Sheila and me to have would grow up in an atmosphere of scorn. "Your old man's a murderer . . . " They'd be chased out of their playground at the break as Jota had once been chased. And not just once. And some teachers would turn a blind eye.

"No" I said.

"What do you mean, no?"

"I'm not going to face a future like that. I'm not going to have kids to be picked on by the whole world."

The happiness died out of Miranda's face, to be replaced by an anxious look.

"Val, you must . . . My world *needs* you and what you can do for it."

"Your world," I said grimly, "is, less to me than the destruction of Shuteley was to you. Far, far less."

Dina was looking from Miranda to me, and back again, comprehending very little of what was happening, and yet comprehending surprisingly much.

"I mean a lot to you," I said. "You know it."

"More than you know."

"I've got a price."

"A price?"

"Trinity Hall," I said.

She didn't understand.

"You told me yourself," I said. "If it weren't for the Trinity Hall bit of the disaster, I'd have a chance. My kids would have a chance. Without Trinity Hall, the death toll in this terrible fire would be astonishingly light. The fire safety arrangements, if not fire prevention, would come out of it rather well. It's facts that count after anything like this. Without the Trinity Hall tragedy it would be a shocking fire, sure, nobody would get any credit, but I wouldn't be thrown to the lions. A few score people would have died in a fire that might have killed thousands. On the whole, I wouldn't have done too badly. I might even keep my job."

"That's all you're thinking of--yourself?" Miranda said. "For all you've said, the fire is no more than a setback to yourself?"

I laughed without humor. "Myself, Sheila, Dina, our kids, and far more. The two hundred who were burned to death in Trinity Hall. If they're not saved . . . I don't want to be saved either."

"You're bluffing. You won't stay here to die."

"I will," I said quietly. "I can't speak for Dina. She can make up her own mind."

Dina said: "Val's all I have. I think I understand what this is about. There are two hundred people you could save -- "

"I can't," Miranda insisted.

"Val thinks you can . . . I haven't had much of a life. My memories are hazy -- but I know Val's always done all he should for me, and maybe more. I'm grateful, too, for what you've done for me. I could have a wonderful life now. But it would be spoiled if I backed down here. This wasn't my idea . . . I'd never have thought of it and I wouldn't have done anything if I had. Now -- if I saved myself, I'd be trading two hundred lives for mine."

"That's nonsense," Miranda said sharply. "Val, you know you don't die. The river of time -- "

"I'm sick to the back teeth of the river of time. I wanted explanations. Now I've had enough. Unless you save the kids and old folk in Trinity Hall, I'm staying here."

"In a suit," said Miranda. "There are suits here. You're bluffing. You'll put them on, stay here and . . . "

She stopped as I picked up the three suits and walked to the wall of the stasis. She didn't protest. She still thought I was bluffing.

But when I threw the first one through, she screamed.

The plastic was fireproof, but the breathing apparatus was not. And the suit

was not sealed.

Chapter Twelve

Miranda pulled urgently at me. "Val, wait," she begged. "You don't understand -- if you destroy the suits, you destroy all chance of getting what you want. Even if I did try to get something done about Trinity Hall . . . To do that I'd have to get back to the copse and speak to . . . to the people in charge. I couldn't leave here without a suit. So if you -- "

I threw a second suit at the invisible wall. It passed limply through and flared only slightly, because the material wouldn't burn. But then the heat got at the oxygen in the breathing apparatus, and there was a minor explosion.

I moved back from the stasis wall with Miranda. "Now we're back where we started," I said. "There's one suit. Dina and I can't both get out. You want to save us. If what you say is true, you *have* to save us. And the only way you can do that is save the people in Trinity Hall."

"They'll never agree," she said.

"But you *have* agreed. You're going to try."

"All right," she said quietly. "I'll try."

There was sudden frantic urgency after the long hours of inaction. In the army, you hurry up and wait. Or, sometimes, Wait and hurry up.

I didn't know what time dawn was, but it must be very soon now.

While there had been nothing we could do, time had not mattered much. But suddenly it was of vital importance. Miranda tugged at the remaining fire-suit, fumbling in her haste. When she had it on, she didn't waste time in talk. She almost ran through the stasis wall.

"I don't suppose you can explain this to me, Val?" said Dina.

"I don't suppose I can."

"But you meant all that about Trinity Hall? Two hundred people are dying there, and she can save them?"

Dina had been sound asleep for hours. Her misconception of the situation was understandable. She didn't know enough, understand enough, to realize that what I was demanding of Miranda was a change of history, an alteration in what had already happened. Dina took it for granted that if two hundred people could be saved, they must still be alive.

"Yes," I said.

Greg had not moved. I took a cursory glance at him; he was breathing, and the injury on his head was merely a bruise, though a large one. He would recover all right. If he took his time about doing it, so much the better. Miranda believed that now she could handle him easily. I wasn't so sure.

"And all we can do is wait?" Dina said.

"All we can do is wait."

By this time the town must be surrounded by half the firemen in England, and no doubt some progress in fighting the dying fire was being made. Water turned to steam would be drawing off a lot of heat from the scorched ground.

Was there a chance, I wondered, that we'd be saved anyway? If the firemen

were able to fight their way into the ravaged town, if they got anywhere near the stasis, we might live, independent of Miranda and the giants.

I found myself hoping desperately. I wanted to live. I wanted Dina to live, now that she had something to live for.

My grandstanding had been sincere enough. For selfish and unselfish reasons, the issue for me had come down to the fate of Trinity Hall and the people in it. I at least half believed that the giants couldn't afford to avert the fire, that they couldn't openly fight it, showing themselves fighting it, that perhaps they really had done all they could by secretly saving a few score of people whose bodies would not be missed.

But somebody could easily have given the alarm at Trinity Hall. A stone through a window -- failure of lights -- smoke through the ventilation -- a tap on a door -- and all those people could be saved. I didn't think Miranda's river of time would be too much disturbed.

I hadn't told Miranda, perhaps I didn't know then, all my own reasons for digging in my heels on this one thing. The really fundamental one was my own feeling of responsibility.

No, I hadn't started the fire. I hadn't been careless or inefficient or venal. I had simply done my job the way I was told and expected to do my job. Nothing had been falsified, nothing hidden. Even on Trinity Hall itself my conscience was clear. Fire officers want to make sure, whatever the cost -- that's their job. Insurance managers don't want fires, don't want to have to pay out, but they have to accept. a calculated risk -- that's theirs. If there's no fire risk, there can be no fire insurance.

Yet accident conceives and gives birth to blame. 'We know it happened: why did it happen?' Millions of stable doors have been slammed after horses have bolted. What really happened in the library, anyway? In detail, Miranda didn't know. Were the alarms severed or switched off -- or were the wires which operated them burned or shorted by the fire itself? Nobody knew better than me that ultimately every additional safety device meant something more that could go wrong.

Trinity Hall represented my hope of mental peace. If *that* didn't happen, if because of me that didn't happen, I believed I could live with the rest. I could be blamed, and feel in my heart that blame was unjust. A car driver who kills a child may never be able to get it out of his mind -- but if he knows he was not at fault, he can live with it.

If I'd been able to say to Miranda "save those people," and she'd said "why of course, Val," it would have been nothing.

But I had to put up my own life. I valued it. I wanted it. I put up my stake, and I made sure I couldn't welch.

If the Trinity Hall youngsters and old folks were saved, I could be saved.

"That's funny," said Dina.

I paid no attention, still wrapped in my thoughts.

"It's getting light," she said.

She was right and she was wrong. It was getting light, but it wasn't funny. Not when the stasis disappeared.

It was Hell.

Fierce heat swept across the village green. The fire outside, by comparison with what it had been, was a mere glow of dying embers.

And yet . . .

My bare flesh withstood the heat for a moment, until it dried and cracked. I could feel, or thought I could feel, my blood beginning to boil. My hair crawled and I felt it singeing.

In those long seconds of burning to death we looked around, while we could still see, in instinctive search for an avenue of escape. Men have

found themselves in front of oven doors opened by mistake . . . for them, even if they die, the chance of flight, of saving themselves, at least exists. The fire has a source and a direction. If the heat is lethal at seven feet it may not be at fourteen, fifty, two hundred. Escape is a possibility.

But there was nowhere for us to go. The heat was all round us, The coolest place was and would continue to be where we were, practically in the center of what had recently been a haven in the conflagration.

Dina's white blouse slowly, steadily, went brown.

Greg, without regaining consciousness, writhed and twisted like a plastic doll thrown into an open fire.

We screamed.

We couldn't breathe. The fire was using up all the oxygen.

Long before we died, we couldn't see.

We could still feel.

I'd have been lucky, after all, to die on my way through the flames with Greg. Jota had been lucky. Then, in the blinding heat of the fire at its height, death came instantly.

Now it was slow, though no less sure.

Slowly, but inexorably, I died.

And came to life again. Of course. It was only to be expected. With Miranda and the giants around, death wasn't death and you could never be sure of life.

I still knew all that had happened. I knew and would always know what it

was like to burn to death in the mere backwash of a great fire.

Now I was unburned, as I had once before been unkilld. The stasis was still in position. Dina's blouse was still white. And Greg was quietly snoring.

Standing over me was Miranda, once more taking off her fire-suit. She had dropped another at her feet.

"Loops," I said drunkenly, "are enough to make a man loop the loop."

"I was ten minutes too late," Miranda said. "But this time I could do something about it." She had a small machine in her hand, like a transistor radio.

"Thank you very much," I said. "Now we can go through the whole thing again. Because I'm still as determined -- "

"It's done," said Miranda.

It took me several seconds to realize what she meant.

"Trinity Hail?" I said at last.

She nodded. "They agreed . . . Your life is necessary, Val. Perhaps Dina's too, we don't know. You had to be saved, far more than Jota had to be saved. In his case we guessed, in yours we know . . . "

"The people in the hall?" I said.

She shrugged. "We cut the electric current. There was panic. One girl and one old man have broken arms. But they all got out. Now -- you have fifteen minutes."

She could be lying, of course. She could be bluffing to get Dina and me away safely, quite powerless, once the giants removed themselves, to take the kind of action which could change the world. Once we saved ourselves,

the chance of bargaining was gone.

I didn't think Miranda herself would lie. But she might easily have been told to return and do what she was doing, say what she was saying.

I started putting on one of the suits. Dina, with a slight shrug, did the same. Miranda sighed in relief.

"We're going past Trinity Hail," I said. "If the bodies are still there, I'm coming right back."

This didn't worry Miranda. "As you like."

"You've got what you want?" I said. "You're satisfied?"

"Yes."

"You're sure?" I looked down at Greg, who had not moved.

"Yes. In my world there's already a big change. The Gift has disappeared. We don't know about the neutrals -- maybe they're not needed any more. Now hurry up and -- "

The suits were on and sealed. "We'll hurry," I said. "Because I need time to get back here and take off my suit if necessary."

"Goodby, Val," said Miranda.

She turned away. She didn't speak to Dina.

I think at the last she was afraid, more afraid than she had ever been before, that something would happen to wrest success from her grasp. She had never really expected success, not with Greg a member of the party. Now she was a big winner, dazed, with the ticket in her hand, waiting for the result of an objection.

I looked down at Greg thoughtfully. Though he had never done a thing to

endear himself to me, I found myself rather sorry for him. I said so.

"He'll have psychiatric treatment," Miranda said. "Before, he'd have refused it. Now he can't."

"You think he'll adjust?"

"Why not? He's only fourteen."

I blinked. I had never directly asked how old the giants were. I knew Miranda was thirty, but she was their teacher.

"And the others?" I said. "You said Greg was in a younger class, didn't you?"

"No. I said he was in a lower class. He's not very bright, you know. The others are . . . they're twelve." She had not looked at me since she said goodbye.

And that was how I left her -- terrified to speak to me again, to meet my eyes, in case I should say or do something that would bring everything tumbling about her ears.

She even forgot to tell me to bury the suits afterwards.

Dina and I made our way back through the dying fire. Trinity Hall was not easy to find: there was no pile of charred skeletons there any more. But we found it. I was satisfied.

We went past the castle and the dump. It was still pretty dark. Clear of the fire we took off our suits and buried them in a piece of dirty sacking I found in the dump, beyond the fire area.

Knowing something of the progress of the fire, the giants had chosen a quite perfect base for their doorway in time, the copse, and an equally perfect route to it. Even now, when there must be thousands of people round the ashpit that was Shuteley, we were able to walk out of the town and

along the river to the copse without being seen . . . the only roads or tracks were *from* the town, and they petered out at the dump and at Castle Hill. We did see a small party of men in blue suits examining the blockage of the river, but we were easily able to keep out of their sight.

So they were all little giants of twelve, I thought. Well, it wasn't really astonishing. Already in 1966 girls were developing at eleven instead of fourteen or fifteen, and at twelve they could be five feet six, 150 pounds and 39-24-37. Boys were slower, but that was coming too.

Dina didn't talk, and I was glad. I'd been bludgeoned physically and mentally for forty hours or so, I'd killed a couple of people and been killed once myself. I'd been shaken figuratively until my teeth rattled.

I had felt too much or too little in the last forty hours. I hadn't been a hero, I hadn't been a villain. I hadn't been very clever and I hadn't been very stupid.

But I was, I hoped and believed, ending up rather better than I had started. I was far more the master of my fate.

We took the route along the bank that the giants must have taken. But there was no longer a bridge, and the boat was on the other side.

"We'll have to swim," I said.

Dina started taking off her clothes.

"No," I said. "We don't want to leave anything here."

"I didn't mean to leave my clothes. I'll carry them."

"Just swim across as you are, Dina," I said wearily.

She paid no attention. She took off her blouse, skirt, nylons and shoes and folded them into a neat bundle which she held clear of the water as she slipped into the river.

In my exhausted state I came very close to an angry outburst, but managed to check it. This was the new Dina. She used to do exactly as I told her. Now I'd have to get used to her thinking for herself.

I had a bundle, too, the fire-suits.

I should have buried them that night. I should have done a lot of other things too.

I didn't do any of them. I simply took off my pants, dried myself and went to bed, not even bothering to find out what, if anything, Dina was doing, not thinking about Sheila beyond taking note that she hadn't been back at the house.

An arm shook me firmly, insistently. I opened my eyes reluctantly. It was 10:30 on the bedside clock.

Sitting on my bed was a large, middle-aged man I didn't know. Yet his face wasn't entirely unfamiliar.

"Mr. Mathers," he said, "I'm Chief Constable Wilson.

Sorry to disturb you like this, but it's important."

"Sheila?" I exclaimed, sitting up quickly.

"Your wife is quite all right, Mr. Mathers. Doing a grand job, in fact. And I've seen your sister. She didn't want to let me in, but I persuaded her."

I swung my legs out of bed.

My nakedness in some other summer might have slightly surprised Wilson. As it was, it was nothing out of the ordinary.

I put on a dressing-gown. "What do you want?" I asked bluntly.

"Forgive the intrusion," he said. "There isn't time to do things the usual way -- "

"Never mind that," I said. "What do you want?"

"I'm just getting the picture, Mr. Mathers. You know about the fire, of course?"

"Yes."

He pantomimed surprise, and I thought: This man knows something.

"You did?" he said. "You might have slept right through it, out here. I've seen one or two fire service people, the police, of course, some of the people who escaped . . . "

"And now you're seeing me."

"Yes. You haven't been in touch with your company yet, have you?"

"No."

He didn't say anything about the fire being tragic, fantastic, incredible -- these things were said in the first few minutes and then the situation was taken for granted.

"Well, first . . . I gather you were out of town at a roadhouse when the fire began. You returned and found some firemen at the New Bridge. You gave them some advice -- good advice, I believe -- and then your wife did some very useful work with homeless people. After that you disappeared for the rest of the night. What happened, Mr. Mathers?"

Without warning I was faced with a choice I hadn't foreseen.

All through I had believed Miranda, on the whole.

And now I faced the beginning of a situation which might mean ruin for Sheila and me and our children. Miranda said it did. I was going to be blamed for everything. My kids were going to grow up wanting to pretend I wasn't their father.

I'd saved two hundred people at the Trinity Hall, but nobody knew I had saved them.

Chief Constable Wilson was not here to cast the first stone. He was simply, as he said, getting a first impression of what had happened. He had heard what happened at the New Bridge, and perhaps that was all he had heard. He might easily have called on me merely because I had shown some presence of mind, had given Sheila a useful job to do, and had then gone off on my own, possibly with a purpose . . .

But this was the start.

I did not, however, have to let things simply take their course. I could take events by the scruff of the neck. If I did, it might mean ruin for Miranda's world. Her river of time might be blasted into an entirely different course. It might not be the best thing for me either. Nevertheless . . .

I opened a cupboard and took out the fire-suits. "Ever seen anything like these before?" I asked.

The die was cast. After I showed Chief Constable Wilson the fire-suits, I couldn't have retreated if I'd wanted to. Certainly they were not impressive to look at, though the baffling way they adjusted to any human body and the still more baffling way in which they sealed and unsealed themselves without buttons or zips or adhesive would make anyone sit up and take notice. But sooner or later somebody would have tested them in a fire, and then a bigger fire, and would finally have discovered that in such suits, people could walk through a furnace.

I didn't want to draw back. Neither did I make any effort to advance.

In the next few hectic hours I talked to a lot of people, of increasing importance -- and I started with the chief constable of the county. I didn't see Sheila or Dina. Too many people wanted to ask me questions.

I told them about Maggie Hobson, and was the first to tell them she was dead. (It took days, of course, before even a preliminary casualty list could be drawn up.) I wasn't really shifting blame from me to her; I was telling them what they were going to decide for themselves.

I told them a few more things about the fire, things I could not possibly have known in any way they considered "rational." I did not admit, nor did I deny, that I had been in Shuteley while the blaze was at its height. They could hardly make me tell them anything they refused to believe . . .

About Miranda and the giants I preserved a reticence which ensured that the most improbable facts were reluctantly accepted instead of rejected out of hand. I told them nothing; I admitted a few things under pressure.

But I did claim credit for Trinity Hall. I told them how the alarm was given, and hinted . . .

And before I saw Sheila, in the evening of the day after the Great Fire of Shuteley, I knew that I'd made the right choice -- for us.

You can't make a scapegoat of a man who knows more of the facts than anyone else. A man who knows things and you can't figure out how he could possibly know them. A man who knows more than he will tell, unless you've worked out three-quarters of the answer first.

Yes, for us I'd made the right choice. And perhaps for Shuteley, for my world. The knowledge, the unwilling certainty, that there had been something supernatural about the fire made the whole thing easier to bear, to accept. For those who had lost people they loved, too, there was hope.

They might still be alive, somewhere.

But had I done the right thing for Snow White and the giants? Had they all ceased to exist -- or had they found the Gift back among them, worse than ever before? Had I dropped a billion hydrogen bombs on the world of 2097?

Well, my attitude proved that I'd been doing Miranda and the giants an injustice all along in finding them inhuman about *our* world.

About *their* world, I couldn't care less.

[back cover blurb]

SHE WAS
THE FAIREST
IN THE LAND

NO MATTER WHERE
SHE CAME FROM -- OR WHEN!

VAL CALLED HER SNOW WHITE
BECAUSE OF HER GLOWING PALE SKIN
AND HER BLUE-BLACK HAIR.
BUT HER FRIENDS FRIGHTENED HIM.
THEY WERE TOO PERFECT
TO BE QUITE HUMAN.
THEY WERE TOO CALM, TOO DETACHED.

WHEN HE DISCOVERED
THEIR POWERS, AND THE USES
TO WHICH THEY MEANT TO PUT THEM,
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OF HIS FEARS HAD BEEN
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